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Plenty For the Both of Us

Illya, for the first time in a long, *long* while, was entirely content with her current situation.

She really, truly was happy. She wasn't being sarcastic, or passive-aggressive, or anything like that. She truly was perfectly content with how things were going for her right now.

She was away from the Einzbern, together with Sella and Leysritt, and would soon be living with her brother and his girlfriends in their house in Japan. She would be away from the depressing atmosphere of the Einzbern-castle, away from her evil family, her grandfather in particular, and she would no longer have to endure the torment they had inflicted on her every day. It was hard to imagine something better.

The fact that her brother was entirely confident that he could change her and her maids into normal humans was a cherry on the cake at that point.

Even the fact that she was confined to her brother's Vault for the moment did nothing to ruin her good mood. Rather, it improved it considerably.

She was not a fool. She knew very well that the Einzbern and their allies would raise hell to get her back once they realised she was gone, which they probably had by now, so in light of that, Illya was very happy to be in a place that was completely beyond their reach. No matter what the Einzbern would try, they would never be able to get at her now that she was in a different dimension entirely.

Some might say that it was like exchanging a prison for another prison, but that wasn't true. It was exchanging a prison for a safe hiding place. Consent made all the difference here. It also helped of course that her stay in the Vault was only temporary. She was to stay in here until they were back in Fuyuki and well away from the Einzbern and the Clocktower.

It might take a few weeks before that happened, but boredom wouldn't be a problem either. There was plenty for her to play around with in the Vault, plenty of new things to see and discover –seriously, the place was *huge* and filled to the brim with all kinds of stuff– and she even had Sella and Leysritt with her to talk with.

The maids had woken up not long after Shirou had left the Vault, very confused about what had happened and very shocked to find themselves in strange surroundings. That they were still tied up probably didn't help them to calm down either.

Illya had tried to reassure them, and like the proper, composed servants they were supposed to be, they had calmed down at once, falling back into a proper maid mindset once they saw she was present as well.

Then, after a quick check to confirm that Shirou had indeed been able to remove their conditioning –Leysritt barely reacted to the news that she was conditioning-free aside from a small, happy smile, but Sella had been shocked enough for the three of them– she had untied them.

After that, once they had collected several pillows and had taken place on the sofa, Illya had started filling them in on everything Shirou had told her so far.

Illya told them about the nature of the pocket dimension they were currently staying in, the fact that Shirou had Mjolnir, that Shirou was completely confident that he could change the three of them into humans, and several other smaller things.

The maids' reaction? It was almost as if she had two Leysritts sitting next to her now, both looking forward into eternity with glazed eyes as they slowly processed everything Illya had told them.

"I understand, mistress." Sella spoke up after half a minute or so, her eyes zoning back into focus, which allowed Illya to distinguish her from her sister again. "I find it all hard to believe, but it is not my place to question you or your brother, so I shall accept your words."

"So business as usual then?" Illya asked jokingly, knowing very well how sceptical Sella was of everything she couldn't verify for herself. Sella didn't respond, merely closing her eyes with a neutral expression, which was pretty much an agreement.

"I believe you, mistress." Leysritt piped up from Illya's other side, giving her a lazy smile.

"Yes! I knew you would, Leysritt. You were always much smarter than Sella!" Illya cheered, happily giving the maid a hug, ignoring Sella's insulted huff from behind her. "I love you!"

"Love you too." Leysritt murmured, wiggling happily in place.

"Mistress." Sella sighed, frowning deeply as she looked at her mistress embracing her sister. "I-"

"Ah! Don't worry, Sella, I love you too." Illya added quickly, turning around on the sofa to hug the older maid as well. "Even if you don't believe me."

"There is no need to pity me, Mistress. I would have been fine without a hug." Sella pretended not to care, but Illya didn't let go, knowing very well that Sella actually did like the hugs very much.

"Alright, what's next?" Illya asked eagerly after letting go of Sella again, to the maid's simultaneous disappointment and relief. "Shall we explore this place? Talk a bit more? Play hide and seek?"

"I would advise waiting for your brother to return." Sella said immediately, placing a firm hand on Illya's shoulder to prevent her from running away. "I don't think it is wise to start digging around in his possessions while he is not present. Even if he will not take offense, some of those possessions might be dangerous."

"Wait for Shirou to return? I thought you didn't like him?" Illya asked, lifting an eyebrow at Sella. "I mean, you threatened to beat him up only a few hours ago, and then he beat you up instead."

"Our battle was not a matter of me liking or disliking him. I simply had to test his mettle." Sella protested vehemently. "I am not upset about my defeat. I achieved what I wanted, which was to see his true nature, and it is that of a valiant and honest man."

"So you don't have any hard feelings about the fact that he beat you in a fight?" Illya asked curiously, before looking at Leysritt when Sella shook her head. "You don't either?"

"Honest battle. We lost." Leysritt shrugged ever so slightly, and Sella nodded in agreement.

"Quite so, quite so." The older maid crossed her arms, and Illya was surprised to see a slight smile on her face. "Mister, or should I say, *lord* Emiya engaged us in fair combat. He did not mock or deride us, and he did not hold back or patronise us. It was, as Leysritt said, an honest battle, one in which he proved himself stronger than us. All that we can do about it is grow stronger ourselves and ask for a rematch later."

"...Wow, that is surprisingly warrior-like of you, Sella." Illya said after a moment of surprised silence. "It's almost as if you are looking forward to another match with Shirou."

"Surprisingly, I *am* looking forward to it." Sella replied, looking almost as surprised as Illya herself at the fact that she actually desired something that wasn't connected to her duties. "How extraordinarily odd."

"I am looking forward to it too." Leysritt nodded slowly, before holding up her arms in a macho pose. "Need to grow stronger first though."

"That's amazing!" Illya clapped her hands in delight, not necessarily about the fact that her maids wanted to fight her big brother again, but more about her maids actually wanting something that did not involve their duties in any way. They had never before expressed such desires, and Illya was very glad they could do so now.

The breaking of their conditioning clearly had had more positive effects than she'd dared hope.

"Yes, it is amazing." Sella murmured, her smile slowly growing wider as her new freedom sunk in.

"So can we explore now?" Illya tried again, hoping that Sella would be distracted enough to-

"Not before your brother returns." It was not to be. Sella resolutely placed a hand on Illya's shoulder again the moment the girl tried to get up from the sofa. "This is a storage space for many Magical objects, some of which might be dangerous. Extreme caution is warranted around Magecraft, especially since there appears to be no security in this... 'Vault' whatsoever. Really, what was lord Emiya thinking when he put us in here?"

"Pocket dimension." Leysritt reminded her older sister. "Safe from the Einzbern."

"...Right, yes, of course. I suppose there is no better hiding place than a pocket dimension." Sella admitted her error, acknowledging that Shirou *had* likely thought things through in advance. "But this being a separate dimension is even more reason not to wander around blindly."

"Shirou would have warned me if there were any dangerous things nearby." Illya protested, contemplating whether struggling against Sella's hold on her shoulder would do anything, but ultimately deciding to sit still and preserve her energy. "And I don't think this place is as unsecured as you think."

"How so, mistress?"

"Well, have you not noticed yet that everything we want suddenly appears close by? When we were collecting pillows, we suddenly found entire piles of them, but I looked around for a bit before you two woke up, and those piles weren't there before." Illya explained, looking on as Sella became visibly unnerved by the information. "I think this place responds to our wishes."

"S-So, if I were to express the wish to prepare tea for us, then...?" Sella ventured carefully, appearing quite alarmed.

"Then, if I am correct, the means to do so should appear." Illya nodded, not feeling particularly spooked about it herself, but certainly understanding why Sella did feel that way. "So maybe we can look around a bit and-"

"There." Leysritt interrupted her, pointing at something to the left. "A stove."

Illya and Sella promptly looked up, both of them well aware that there hadn't been a stove anywhere near to them when they had walked around earlier, and they saw what Leysritt pointed at, which turned out to be a bit more than just a simple stove.

The stove Leysritt had spotted was circle-shaped and the size of a small room. It had more than twenty burners, a removable stovetop griddle, electronic control panels for programmed cooking times, and convection ovens. It was made out of a shiny, silver-coloured material, and was well-stocked with a variety of equipment, most of which Illya didn't recognise.

To finish the picture, the stove was flanked to the left by a large display case holding a collection of beautiful, exquisite kettles, and flanked to the right by a display case holding a collection of marvellous teapots and matching cups. Behind the stove, there was a massive cupboard storing more than a hundred different kinds of tea.

It was quite a sight, and it was made even more impressive by the fact that the whole setup had definitely *not* been there before. Illya, Sella, and Leysritt would surely have seen it sooner, maybe even right away, if it had already been present, but they hadn't.

"See?" Illya grinned at Sella, deciding to just roll with it. "The things inside this place move by themselves, and I think anything dangerous will stay well away from us. That means we can explore!"

"...Let me make a pot of tea while I think it over." Sella eventually said, throwing the blanket off herself, before rising from the couch and mechanically walking over to the stove. "Any preference for tea, mistress?"

"What choices do I have?"

"Apple, blackberry, blueberry, caramel, chai, chamomile, chocolate, cinnamon, cranberry, echinacea, elderberry, ginger, hibiscus, lemon, lemongrass, mango, mint, orange, peach, pomegranate, pumpkin, raspberry, rose hips, turmeric, and vanilla." Sella obediently read out all the tastes one by one. "There is also green tea, black tea, hot apple pie-flavour, earl grey, Turkish apple, and cherry, as well as several recipes for herbal teas, such as tisane, tanna, matcha, and genmaicha. There is also-"

"Just a pot of green tea for me, please." Illya said quickly, before Sella could start reading out even more flavours.

"Can I have tisane?" Leysritt asked, her eyes glittering slightly in desire.

"One pot of green tea and one pot of tisane." Sella nodded, before she got to work, handling the kettle and the pots very carefully in order to prevent damaging them in any way, before gingerly attempting to make the stove obey her instructions.

Fortunately, the stove turned out to be obedient enough, and before long, Sella could serve the promised cups of tea. For herself, she also took a cup of green tea.

"Thank you, Sella." Illya smiled brightly, before taking a sip. "Mhm, delicious!"

Sella didn't reply to the compliment, but it was usual for her not to react much to being complimented on anything related to her duties as a maid, so Illya didn't pay it too much mind.

For a few minutes, the only sounds inside the Vault were those of three women slowly drinking their tea.

"Have you decided yet whether you'll come along with me when I'm going to explore?" Illya brought the earlier subject up again when her cup was empty. "Come on, it will be fun!"

Sella, who had finished her cup at around the same time as Illya, flinched at the return of the subject she'd hoped to have buried, while Leysritt, who hadn't even drunk half of her tisane yet, glanced over at her mistress, before turning back to her cup, deciding to let her older sister handle it.

"A compromise then, mistress." Sella proposed quickly, having resigned herself to the fact that Illya wasn't going to be convinced by any argument. "Let us meet halfway."

"Oh, what is this compromise?" Illya asked, her ears perking up.

"Please wait with exploring until your brother returns, and ask for his permission. If he guarantees it is safe to walk around, Leysritt and I will gladly accompany you in your exploration."

"Hm." Illya actually had to think about that. On one hand, she wanted to go exploring as quickly as possible, to find whatever treasures were buried in the immense piles and obtain all knowledge that was hidden in the vast hall. On the other hand, she didn't want to worry Sella too much, and having her maids come with her while she was walking around through the Vault would surely be more fun than if she did so alone. So, she would choose...

"Alright, fine, you win. I accept this compromise. I will ask Shirou for permission first."

"Thank you, mistress." Sella sighed in relief, bowing deeply.

"But only if it doesn't take too long." Illya added her own stipulation to the deal, pouting at her maid. "I won't wait for hours and hours."

"I'm sure that won't be needed! Lord Emiya didn't appear to be a man who would make you wait."

"Wait for what?"

"EEEH!" "EEP!"

Both Illya and Sella almost jumped out of their skins when Shirou suddenly appeared behind them, while Leysritt, who had already noticed him arrive, continued drinking her tisane in excruciatingly tiny sips, using the cup to hide her small smirk.

"Shirou!"

"Lord Emiya!"

"Hello again, Illya." Shirou grinned at his sister, before lifting an eyebrow at Sella. "There's no need to call me 'lord', miss Sella. Dad didn't have the title of lord, and even if he did, Illya would be the one who inherited his title, not me. She's his actual daughter, and older than me besides."

"I do not call you a lord because of your family line, lord Emiya." Sella explained calmly, persisting in her use of Shirou's title. "The Emiya-family is not lordly, in fact, its head does not hold any title whatsoever. Had your father been here, he would have been mister Emiya. Lady Illyasviel is a lady because of her Einzbern-lineage, not because of her Emiya-lineage."

"Then why do you call me lord anyway?"

"Sorcerers deserve naught but the highest respect." Sella stated bluntly. "Therefore, you are a lord."

"Sorcerer...?" That really took Shirou aback, his mouth falling open in shock, but then he seemed to realise what she meant. "Oh, because of the Vault?"

Sella didn't respond to his question, merely bowing her head, her every move radiating deference and respect. Next to her, Leysritt slowly mimicked her, also bowing her head.

Shirou was visibly unnerved by it, looking between the maids with a helpless expression, and Illya decided to take pity on him.

"Oh, Shirou! Before I forget, Sella and Leysritt are not angry with you for defeating them. They considered it an honour to fight you, and they hope you'll spar with them again after they've trained a bit more."

"Mistress!" Sella hissed, jerking her gaze towards Illya with a look in her eyes that was simultaneously scolding and pleading. "One does not make such impudent requests of-"

Then she froze stiff, realising she had lost her composure in front of the Sorcerer, and immediately snapped her head to look at the floor again, attempting to rebuild her graceful persona.

But it was too late. Sella had broken her perfect exterior, and Shirou and Illya now had an avenue of attack.

"I would only be glad to spar with you again." Shirou smiled, reaching out to pat the maids on their heads. "I already told Illya that I was most impressed by your performance in our battle, and you both have much room to grow. I look forward to our future fights."

"I won't make it easy for you." Leysritt mumbled, a competitive edge entering her voice as she lifted her head to look at Shirou with a determined gaze. "Don't get cocky."

"Oh?" Shirou flashed a grin in return. "I look forward to it even more now."

"L-L-Leysritt?!" Sella's eyes boggled at the tone her fellow maid was taking with Shirou. "Y-You can't just-"

"It's fine, really." Shirou assured her quickly, holding up his hands to stop Sella from scolding her younger sister. "There is no need for all the deference you've been showing. In fact, it would be much easier for me if you pretended that I am not a Sorcerer at all."

"Not a...?" Sella seemed outraged by the mere suggestion, but when both Shirou and Illya gave her a pleading look, she gave in, albeit with some grinding of her teeth. "Fine. If that is what you want, *mister* Emiya, then I shall obey."

"Thank you." Shirou smiled, wiping some imaginary sweat off his brow. "I would have been in a lot of trouble if anyone else got as much as an inkling that I am capable of unusual Crafts, and the Kaleidoscope is one of the most unusual."

"The Clocktower would have gone mad." Illya sniggered, and Shirou smiled as well at the mental image, though his smile contained a fair share of pain too, considering he would be the one who would have to clean up the mess. "But they don't suspect anything yet?"

"Nothing. Some people hate me and are looking for whatever they find to hurt me, others suspect I am hiding something and want to find out what it is, some are even investigating me because I have been hanging around the Department of Policies so much, but none of them have found anything they can use so far." Shirou replied, not perfectly sure of his case, but still rather sure.

"...You are a secretive man, mister Emiya, if you can hide your secrets in the middle of the Magus Association's headquarters." Sella said, looking impressed despite herself. "You may only be the Magus Killer's adoptive son, without a blood relation, but you resemble him closely indeed."

"...I'm not sure how to react to that." Shirou frowned, and Illya had to agree it was pretty much a backhanded compliment.

"But anyway." Illya continued, wanting to cut to the case. "Shirou, is it alright if Sella, Leysritt, and I go exploring once you leave again?"

"Exploring? The Vault, you mean?"

"Yes! There's so much stuff lying around, and I want to see it all." Illya cried, giving him her best puppy dog eyes. "Please?! Pretty please? Pretty please with a cherry on top?"

"Well, uh..." Shirou did not seem to know what to say, and he looked over at Sella for help. "What do you think?"

"The most important matter is that it is safe." The maid replied calmly, having regained her composure completely by now. "If you can guarantee lady Illyasviel's safety, I shall be glad to accompany her on her exploration."

"Of course it is safe." Shirou answered immediately, looking mildly insulted by Sella's insinuation that it could possibly not be. "I would not leave you here if there was any danger. Anything that's even remotely dangerous is locked away in other rooms, I assure you."

"Other rooms?" Sella asked sharply. "Forgive my interruption and my change in subject, but, other rooms?"

"This is only the entrance hall." Shirou explained shortly, gesturing around at said hall. "There are countless other rooms holding the more... special objects. And no, you cannot go there."

The last remark was made to Illya herself, who had been about to ask if she could go and take a look at some of those rooms. She would have protested, but he sounded serious enough that she instinctively knew he wasn't going to budge on it.

"But this hall is safe." Shirou continued after Illya nodded in acceptance. "As long as you behave normally and keep to the general rules of safety, you should be fine."

"Ah, just to clarify, what were those 'general rules of safety' again?" Illya asked. Shirou acted like it was obvious, but the white-haired girl had no idea what those general rules could be. "I don't think the Einzbern taught them to me."

"Well, you know, don't touch anything emitting Magical Energy, don't play around with sharp things, be careful around electricity, don't mess with anything you don't understand, and don't trust anything that communicates with you if it isn't completely obvious where its brain and soul are located."

"...Are there things that will communicate with us here?" Sella asked after a beat of silence, in which both she and Illya had been staring at Shirou with wide eyes. Leysritt did not seem particularly impressed however.

"No, there's nothing in this hall that's capable of thought." Shirou shook his head. "Aside from the hall itself, but you don't have to worry about that."

"That's easy for you to say!" Illya spluttered, while Sella deadpanned at the redhead and even Leysritt looked perturbed. "I'm not used to my halls being sentient."

"It's really nothing to worry about." Shirou repeated, scratching the back of his head, before sighing when the three girls kept glaring. "It's completely obedient. You can just tell it to stand down, and it will stop doing anything. It means you'll have to collect everything here by yourself, but that's your own choice."

"So that is why everything was conveniently located nearby when we wanted it." Leysritt concluded with a sudden and scary eloquence, hitting her palm with her fist in realisation. "The hall was moving it to us."

"That is correct." Shirou nodded, not nearly as surprised as Sella and Illya by her sudden eloquence and thus able to answer straight away. "I myself was surprised to discover the function as well, but it's also

the reason that every time I reach into the Vault, I immediately get what I want."

"Hm." Leysritt nodded. "Please leave it in place."

"Of course."

"Don't just decide that on your own!" Sella protested, giving her sister an incredulous glare. "Why are you suddenly talking so much anyway?"

"Felt like it." Leysritt shrugged, an enigmatic smile on her face.

Sella boggled at the other maid, while Illya remained frozen next to her, not yet recovered from the double blow of being informed she'd been staying in a sentient hall and hearing Leysritt talk like a normal person.

"...So, anyway, feel free to explore." Shirou said eventually, after it became obvious the girls weren't about to talk any time soon. "Just don't do anything foolish, and please don't break anything. Sella, I'm counting on you to keep these two in line when I leave again."

"Eh? EH?! U-Uh, y-yes! You can count on me, lord Emiya." Sella, upon being assigned the role of leader, spent the first moment being confused, then surprised, and then both proud and motivated. She also slipped back into calling him lord.

She had always responded well to being praised.

"Where will you be going, Shirou?" Illya asked, having collected herself a bit again. "Can you not stay for a little while longer?"

"The purge of the Meluastea is about to start, so there's much I need to do. In a few minutes, I'll be accompanying Lady Barthomeloi, who wants me to come with her to see lady Archelot." Shirou explained, bowing his head in a gesture of apology and regret, and thus missing how Illya perked up at his words. "I accused the Department of Botany of being involved with the Meluastea, and now Lady Barthomeloi wants to hear from this lady Archelot, who is the former head of that Department, in private."

"You are going on a trip with Lorelei Barthomeloi?" Illya squealed, having stopped listening after Shirou revealed that little fact. "Oh my God, Shirou, are you courting her?"

"NO!" Shirou yelped, taking a step back as if Illya had taken a swing at him, the shock writ clear on his face. "Heavens, no. Of course I'm not!"

"Right, you already have Sakura and Ayako." Illya snapped her fingers in realisation, before balling her hand into a fist and bonking herself on the head. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to imply you were unfaithful. *She* is courting *you* then?"

"Also no!" Shirou snapped. "Where are you even getting those ideas from?"

"Well, if she's invited you to an outing with her..."

"It will be purely business!" Shirou stressed, though the unnerved look in his eyes indicated to Illya she may have hit a nerve somehow. "She will have her bodyguards with her, we will travel by car, and all I am supposed to do is present my accusations to lady Archelot and see what she has to say in return. There's *no* need for *anything* to happen between me and Lady Barthomeloi!"

"Okay, okay, I was only teasing. No need to get all worked up." Illya held up her hands in surrender when she saw how serious he was, giving him a sheepish smile. "Honestly, big brother, I meant nothing with it."

"...Teasing?" Shirou blinked several times in surprise, before rubbing the back of his head again, laughing sheepishly as well. "A-Ah, o-of course. My apologies, I took it too seriously."

"Well, I suppose the Vice-Director does that to people." Illya nodded sagely. "Even in the Einzbern-castle, we heard the rumours about her. Is she as imposing in person as they claim she is?"

"Well, I'd say she is both better and worse than what the rumours say." Shirou mused. "She is pretty reasonable actually, and she is willing to change her mind when necessary. On the other hand, even the most overblown of rumours can't prepare you for what it's like to stand in her way when she'd made up her mind. She's like a tank rolling over everything in her path."

"...I guess it's good you aren't courting her. Ladies generally don't like it when you compare them to tanks." Illya sweatdropped, before recollecting herself. "But I guess the Vice-Director wouldn't have lasted long in her position if she wasn't at least a bit reasonable. I never put much stock in the rumour saying she is a monster anyway."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Being reasonable doesn't seem to be a necessity in the Clocktower." Shirou huffed. "The previous Vice-Directors were apparently stubborn bastards, and it seemed to work well enough for them. Then again, Lady Montmorency told me they were never actually involved in ruling, so perhaps that's why they never messed up."

"Lady Montmorency?" Illya blinked at her big brother as he mentioned yet another big name. "Shirou, what are you doing exactly that you know both the Vice-Director and the Second-In-Command?"

"Oh, you know of Lady Montmorency too?"

"Who doesn't? She's pretty much the de facto leader of the Magus Association." Illya huffed, remembering all the times that her grandfather had talked about that impressive woman with a mixture of admiration and fear. "More importantly, why do *you* know her? And to the extent she's telling you about her previous bosses at that?"

"We've met a few times, for a variety of reasons." Shirou explained while making a dismissive hand motion, as if it didn't matter at all that he was acquainted with one of the Magus Association's most feared people. "I fixed an elevator for her once."

Shirou's answer did not make things any clearer for Illya, but before she could ask for clarification, her brother held up a hand.

"Sorry, Illya, but I can't stay to chat any longer. I know you have questions, but the visit to lady Archelot will be soon, and the purge of the Meluastea will begin after that. I need to go, but I promise to answer any questions you have once I return."

"Alright." Illya chirped, feeling a bit disappointed he couldn't stay longer but not about to let that ruin the mood. In lieu of a goodbye, she shouted several encouragements. "Bust some heads! Save some people! Make dad proud."

The first encouragement she shouted was for herself, because she liked the idea that arrogant Magi would be punished for their crimes.

The second encouragement was for Shirou, whom she knew wanted nothing more than to save people.

The third encouragement was for them both. If the spirit of Kiritsugu was watching them, they had to make him proud of them.

The smile she received in return was warm enough to heat up the entire hall.

"Sella." Shirou then said in a commanding tone, and the elder maid, who had taken a few steps back while the siblings were talking, snapped at attention. "I already told you to keep these two in line. Here, take this cell phone. If anything happens, don't hesitate to call me. I'm on speed dial, you can just press these buttons."

"A phone?" Sella looked at the small device with a wondrous gaze, turning it this way and that in her hands, before turning to Shirou again and giving another bow. "You can rely on me, Lord Emiya."

"Oi, Shirou, don't I get a phone?" Illya pouted at her big brother. She didn't want to be petulant, but she also wanted such a fancy machine.

"Of course you do." Shirou assured her, before indeed handing her and Leysritt their own phones. "I simply needed to give some instructions to Sella first."

"Oof, big brother. It's almost as if you trust Sella more than me." Illya pouted, before she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "*Do* you trust her more than me?"

"When it comes to keeping discipline and obeying the rules? Definitely." Shirou nodded, and Illya found she had no rebuttal to that. "Take care, Illya. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Ah, yes, bye." Illya waved, Sella and Leysritt mimicking the motion, before Shirou disappeared, as quickly and quietly as he had appeared.

"...So." Sella began after a few moments had passed. "Does anyone want another cup of tea or...?"

"No." Illya shook her head, having made up her mind, before giving her maid a big grin. "Let's go exploring."

"Very well." Sella nodded, looking as if she'd expected that answer already. "Though I warn you, mistress. If you are not careful or break something, I will not hesitate to tell your brother."

"Eck! He has turned you to his side!" Illya flinched at the remark, before she slumped. "Ah, well, I suppose that was inevitable. He is so much cooler than me, no wonder he won you over."

"He is so much more responsible than you, you mean."

"Fortunately, Leysritt is still on my side." Illya continued, ignoring Sella's pointed remark. "Right, Leysritt?"

"Yes, mistress." Leysritt nodded, and Illya let out a whoop of joy.

"You two." Sella sighed in consternation, but there was no denying the smile on her face.

Tobias Verrati had never wanted to become an Executor.

For most of his life, he hadn't even known what an Executor was.

He had grown up in a simple, bog-standard orphanage, with many other orphans, in a large town in Southern Italy. He had never known his parents, as they had passed away long before he reached an age at which he could form memories. His father had died in gang violence as an innocent bystander, and his mother had been killed by a hitman soon after, a hitman hired by her own sister, so that said sister could take her house.

Tobias supposed he should be glad his aunt had bothered giving him to an orphanage instead of having her husband drown him. He should be even more glad that the orphanage had been rather good to him.

The trio of elderly ladies in charge of the orphanage truly cared about the children and did their very best to take care of them all. They had been very poor, but they had housed them, fed them, played with them, and educated them in the basic skills of reading and writing. The

ladies had never complained, not even when the number of children under their care exceeded twenty, and though Tobias hadn't properly appreciated it back then, he certainly did now.

Tobias had grown up poor, but he'd never felt like he really missed something in his childhood. It also helped that the town as a whole was poor, and that most children, even the ones with parents, lived exactly the same lives as he did. The only exceptions were the rich kids, from the families that ruled the town and the surrounding area, but those rich kids never came within ten kilometres of Tobias' orphanage, so he couldn't even be jealous of them.

He might still have been jealous though, if it hadn't been for the elderly ladies, who, aside from raising the children, also taught them about God, Christ, and the church. They taught them the importance of kindness, and to avoid the Seven Deadly Sins, among them Envy.

Not that Tobias had cared much about religion though. He mostly just went through the motions whenever they went to Church and tried to suppress any evil feelings he might have had. Faith was just an abstract concept to him though, something he had not understood.

Which was another reason why it was odd that he had become an Executor in service of the Burial Agency later in life.

It had all happened so suddenly. One moment, he'd been fifteen years old, helping the elderly ladies as much as he could around the orphanage while also looking for a job to earn some money, as innocent as any child his age, and then, the next moment, everything had changed.

An extraordinarily rude man had barged into the orphanage, and demanded to adopt Lisa, a girl of twelve years old, whose doll-like features had indicated that she'd grow up to become a beauty without compare.

Even a blind, deaf, and stupid person would have seen that the rude man had bad intentions, and the elderly ladies had not hesitated to refuse him, before pointing him the door.

The man hadn't listened however, and had made to grab Lisa anyway, who had been sitting at a table in the main hall at the time, helping Tobias with cutting the vegetables for that day's dinner.

Tobias did not remember well what had happened next. The rude man had made a grab for Lisa, Lisa had screamed in fear, Tobias had felt afraid, terrified, *angry*, and the next moment, the rude man was on the floor, a hole in his chest, while Tobias stood over him, the vegetable knife in his hand covered in blood.

The hours after were a blur too. Tobias remembered one of the elderly ladies gently taking the knife from him, while Lisa hugged him strongly, and Pedro, another teen from the orphanage, covered the body with a bedsheet. He remembered the police arriving and taking him with them. He remembered being brought to an interrogation room, and being told that the rude man was a cousin of the mayor, and that he would likely be sentenced to prison for a very long time, for a brutal, unjustified murder.

At the time, he had been too numb to realise what had been going on, but every time he thought back on it now, he got cold shivers down his spine. He had only just escaped a life-sentence, and considering he was an enemy of the mayor, prison would *not* have been fun for him.

It had never gotten that far however. In fact, the case had never even made it beyond that first interrogation.

A stranger in a cloak had burst into the room, and before any of the officers present could react, had seized their minds and ordered them to return to their posts and not speak a word about anything.

The cloaked stranger had then introduced himself as an Executor, one of the warriors of God, and he had asked if Tobias wanted to join his organisation.

"We need killers like you." The man had said, the expression under the hood being a mixture of grief and bitter amusement. *"We need people whose first instinct is to murder whatever threatens them or threatens the people under their care. That you have a natural talent for the Sacred Arts is also a plus."*

Tobias, still in a daze, had had trouble following what the man said exactly, but he did understand that the man's offer was likely his only option left at that point, after he'd murdered the mayor's cousin.

"If you accept, I'll kill that fat lard of butter that this town calls a mayor." The stranger had added, and that had sealed the deal completely.

Tobias had become the apprentice of an Executor, and five years later, became an Executor himself.

He still wasn't sure about his relationship with God, whether he even really believed that God existed at all, but he did know that the things that went bump in the night did in fact exist, and that by killing them, he was doing good work.

He just hadn't expected actual wizards to be one of those things that went bump in the night, nor had he expected that he'd be hunting down said wizards.

Though the correct term turned out to be 'Magus', since Wizards were apparently an entirely separate class of beings that were far above his ability to handle. According to his teacher, there was only one true Wizard out there these days, and one sort-of-Wizard, and both would crush him under their heel without even noticing he was there.

Magi were a different matter though. Tobias had hunted those often enough, and now he was doing so again.

He'd just returned from a mission that consisted of hunting down several Ghouls when he'd been called in by his superior, who had told him in hushed tones that they wanted him to destroy a nest of Magi that had made themselves guilty of acts so horrid that even the main Magus-coven, the Clocktower, could not abide them anymore.

They had promised him a hefty reward if he accepted, so Tobias -who was always looking for more money to send to the orphanage- had left his gear in his suitcase and had joined his new team for the mission. The nest was located in the inlands of Southern Spain, so they had taken the plane, rented a car, and were now driving towards the nest.

As said before, their main mission was to destroy, but if possible, they were also to gather information about the Magi and their masters.

Apparently, one single family was behind the whole mess, and that family was... Come, what was it again?

Ah yes, the Meluastea.

Truly an evil name.

"We're almost at the hide-out."

The calm remark, made in a carefree voice, came from Will, one of Tobias' partners for the mission and also the one driving the car. Tobias had met the small, blonde-haired boy a few times before, but this was the first time he'd ever gone on a mission with him.

Will was, quite frankly, an enigma, always smiling no matter what happened, and Tobias never quite knew how to deal with the boy.

"Took you long enough."

The complaining response came from Halt, an old Executor with grey hair and a grey beard, who had wrapped himself in a cloak on the backseat and had his eyes shut. He had been asleep for most of the trip but had awoken when Will had made his announcement.

"I hate to agree with Halt on anything, but I am looking forward to cracking some skulls as well."

Horace, the large, muscled teen sitting in the passenger's seat, cracked his knuckles, grinning eagerly as he stared off into the distance, where the sun was only just rising.

As the nest had been reported to be very small, only the four of them had been sent to destroy it. It might seem a little callous of the superiors to send so few, but Tobias had faith that the four of them would be enough.

Will and Halt were masters of long-range fighting and were excellent scouts at that, while Horace was a champion with the blade, to the point where some said he could reach the rank of Blademaster before he turned thirty. Tobias himself wasn't too shabby either, excelling mainly at mid- to close-range fighting.

With the four of them, they shouldn't have any trouble with the nest, provided it was as small as the report said it was. Tobias had no reason to doubt the report though, so he didn't worry too much about it.

Rather, he worried about his teammates. They had quite the reputation in the Burial Agency, and from his earlier brushes with them, Tobias knew he shouldn't talk too much when in their presence, lest he provided them with ammunition for one of their infamous teasing-rounds.

But he was a quiet person by nature, so that was fine.

"Will, what's this?" Halt barked when the blonde-haired boy pulled the car over and parked at the side of the road, about ten minutes later. "There's nothing here."

Halt spoke the truth. From their position, there was nothing for as far as the eye could see. The road they had been driving on was the only sign of civilization in sight, with everything else being merely a sandy plain that stretched on to the horizon in all directions.

To put it simply, it was a desert with a single road leading through it.

"It's here, Halt." Will replied calmly, his expression hardening as he looked out of the car's window. "You would see that too if you used your senses."

Halt lifted an eyebrow at Will's serious answer, and he too looked out of the window. Almost immediately after, his eyes widened, and then he grabbed his and Will's bows from the trunk in almost aggressive motions.

"I take it you found the nest?" Horace ventured, looking around with some confusion as his friends scrambled to arm themselves. "I thought the report said it was well hidden, and that you two wouldn't be able to find it without instructions."

"The report was wrong!" Halt barked as he stepped out of the car, not a trace left of the old grouch he'd been only minutes before. "There are massive traces of Thaumaturgy coming from underground. Something's happening, something massive."

"Do you think they spotted us?" Tobias asked, taking a single Black Key in hand. "Are they destroying evidence?"

"They might be, or there's a power struggle going on." Halt replied, rushing forward. "In any case, we have no time to lose. Let's go!"

No more words were said. None of them had any idea what was going on exactly, but they all knew that speed was of the absolute essence. Regardless of *what* was happening exactly, it was clear that something had gone very wrong.

The entrance to the hide-out was easily found. It was a hole in the ground after all, one from which an immense amount of Magical Energy was bursting forth. The hole was too dark to see anything inside, but once Tobias lit a torch and threw it down, they saw it was a tunnel going directly down for several meters, before becoming horizontal and leading further into the Earth in a gentle downwards slope.

"An uncovered hole?" Will asked sceptically once they had seen everything there was to be seen from above. "They didn't bother to hide the entrance to their lair?"

"They did." Halt corrected him grimly, pointing at an object half-buried under sand a few metres away. "That's a hatch. It should have been on this opening, probably covered by a thin layer of sand to hide it, but someone ripped it open with brute force. The Bounded Fields and Defensive Spells have been crushed as well."

Tobias agreed with the old man's assessment, and he found himself torn between being glad someone had already done the heavy lifting for them, and being nervous about *what* had done all the heavy lifting for them.

"Let's find out who's been stealing our kills then." Horace clearly did not share Tobias' nervousness however, and he jumped down the tunnel, descending into the Earth with a whoop of joy. "Wahoo!"

"Seventeen years old and still a child." Halt scoffed, before turning to Tobias and Will. "I'll watch our backs until you two are inside as well. Will first, and then Tobias. Support Horace as much as you can."

"Yes sir." Will nodded, before he jumped down, and Tobias followed him without a word.

Once they had landed, Tobias immediately noticed Horace standing a little further down the tunnel, looking ahead with narrowed eyes.

Tobias followed his gaze, and then spotted the immense amount of damage that had been done to the tunnel. Cracks and holes were everywhere, blood had been splattered all over the walls, the electric lamps that should have provided light were smashed to bits, and there was a foul stench in the air.

The stench of a graveyard.

"Dead Apostle." Tobias concluded, and both Will and Horace nodded.

"Then don't just stand there." Halt, who had come up from behind, scoffed at them. "Go on! Horace, you take point, Tobias behind him, and Will, you're with me, a little bit behind those two. We provide ranged support."

"Aye, Aye, Halt." Horace nodded, before storming forward, sword in hand. Tobias followed behind him, taking three Black Keys in each hand, holding them between his fingers like claws, and he vaguely noticed Halt and Will nocking arrows on their bows.

They progressed through the tunnel like that, at a respectable speed, but still slow enough to thoroughly check their surroundings for any ambushes or traps.

They didn't find any ambushes or traps however. All they found was more destruction, more blood, and now even some body parts strewn about haphazardly.

Then, after what felt like an hour but was actually only a minute or so, they arrived at a large room. It was well-lit and filled with all kinds of objects.

It was a disaster.

Tobias had read in the report that the Magi in this hide-out had captured innocent people for their experiments, and he had hoped to save at least a few of them, but every human being in the underground laboratory had been mauled so thoroughly it was completely impossible to tell the difference between the abductors and the abductees.

Every single object had been smashed, burned, ripped apart, or crushed. Documents had been torn to bits. Fires had been set

throughout the room. The damage was immense, and the trail of destruction continued from the laboratory into a second tunnel on the other side of the lab.

It was not hard to draw a definite conclusion now.

"Someone beat us to this nest." Will concluded, and the other three nodded.

"But what?" Tobias asked the question they were all wondering, but he received only shrugs in response.

"That would be me!"

The sudden screech made every hair on the back of Tobias' neck rise and almost froze the blood in his veins. Having been trained very well however, Tobias didn't break his stance and held his Black Keys primed as something approached from the tunnel that led deeper into the nest. Next to him, Will, Halt, and Horace followed his example.

They did not have to wait long before a gigantic black bird emerged from the shadows.

Its size would have already made it unnatural, but the almost smirking expression, the blood-covered claws that seemed made out of silver, and the sheer vileness radiating from the animal confirmed that this was not a normal avian. This was something *far* worse.

"Gransurg Blackmore!" Halt spat at the bird, and Tobias' heart almost stopped at the news that this was a Dead Apostle Ancestor. "Why are you here?"

"Why, for the same reason you are, I gather." The bird replied as it landed on the ground, reaching only to Tobias' waist in height, yet seeming to glare down on them all. "To destroy these Magi and erase their crafts."

"Why do you care-?"

"For reasons of my own." Blackmore interrupted Will harshly, continuing to glare at them. "You took too long, so I did it myself."

"The abducted people-"

"I made no distinction. I killed everyone and destroyed everything." Blackmore's words were merciless, and Tobias' fingers itched to throw his Black Keys at the bird. It would only result in his death however, so he held himself back.

"Is this a statement from-"

"You should leave at once." Blackmore advised them in a falsely kind voice. "You have thirty-seven seconds, and then this place will explode. If you remain here, you will explode with it."

Then the bird was gone, having flown past them so quickly they couldn't even perceive it.

For a moment, they stood still in stupefied silence.

"RUN!"

Then they turned around and ran for the exit. None of them questioned the warning Blackmore had given them, for they all felt the power and heat increase behind them. The nest was about to blow, and they needed to get out of the tunnel before it did.

When they had been going inside, it had taken them a minute to go from the entrance to the laboratory. On the way back, they took twenty seconds to cover that same distance.

"Climb as fast as you can!" Halt barked, sending the boys up the ladder first. "Climb!"

Tobias climbed, he climbed as fast as he could, determined not to die as collateral damage in an explosion set off by a Dead Apostle. He flew up the ladder, following behind Will and Horace, and he felt more than he saw how Halt followed him just as quickly.

In the end, they *just* made it. The moment Halt emerged from the tunnel and threw himself to the side, a massive pillar of fire shot out of the opening, as if the base had turned into a geyser.

Tobias, Halt, Will, and Horace, upon confirming that they were all in good health, collapsed on the ground in exhaustion, and it was only after a solid minute that Horace spoke up again.

"So..." He began slowly, lifting his head slightly. "Who's going to tell Kayla and bishop Dilo about this?"

Will and Halt froze, and then turned to Tobias.

Tobias himself could only sigh, and then he nodded in acceptance.

At least neither Kayla nor bishop Dilo were people who punished failure too harshly.

Shirou had a problem.

Not a huge problem or anything, no, certainly not. It was a moderate problem at best, nothing that would require a red alert. Immediately action was not necessary, and none of his checkboxes for 'huge problem' were ticked yet.

He wasn't dying, his loved ones weren't in danger, he wasn't having an ugly argument with anyone he cared about, he hadn't lost Illya, he was pretty sure the Einzbern were still unaware that *he* was the one who had taken her, and none of his secrets had gotten out to the Clocktower.

Since it checked none of those boxes, it could not qualify as a really serious problem.

On the other hand, it would also go too far to say that it was a minor problem. It wasn't, it was moderate at the very least. The situation he'd found himself in might not be harmful, but it was still very inconvenient and perhaps even a bit distressing. If he'd had a choice at all, he would have opted to stay far away from it.

He didn't have a choice however. There was nothing Shirou could do about it. He couldn't run away from it, he couldn't fight it, he couldn't avoid it, and he couldn't talk his way out of it either.

The root of the problem was a direct order from Lady Barthomeloi, and one didn't just refuse an order from the Vice Director without suffering some form of unpleasant consequences. As such, Shirou had had no choice but to obey and take whatever issues might spring from it in stride.

On the other hand, while he may not have liked his current situation, he definitely didn't regret the sequence of events that had led to said situation. There was nothing he would have done differently if he'd been able to do it all over again, even if doing things differently would have allowed him to dodge his current problem.

When Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency had spoken the previous day about thoroughly searching the Departments of Archaeology and Mineralogy, right after Lord El-Melloi and he had delivered the file of the Meluastea to them, there was simply no way Shirou could not have mentioned the Department of Botany as well.

He too wanted the Meluastea to fall after all. He too wanted them gone and unable to harm anyone else ever again. As such, he had chosen to mention that he had received information from a reliable source that the Meluastea also had their claws in the Department of Botany.

If innocents were being harmed in that place as well, then certainly, they had to put a stop to that too. They couldn't leave a part of the problem to fester, it had to be cut away and burned just like the rest of it.

Unfortunately, the ladies had not believed him at first. They had doubted his words and questioned his source, and Lady Barthomeloi had revealed that she had been close –as far as that woman could be close to anyone– with the former head of the Department of Botany, who had retired only a few years earlier. Because of that, she could not believe that the woman was involved in anything illegal or even just slightly shady.

Raquel Archelot, said former head, was honourable, kind, just, and apparently impressive enough to gain the respect of the Vice-Director herself, if Reines and Melvin –whom Shirou had later questioned about it– could be believed.

Shirou had been adamant however, as he trusted Fernando Li enough to believe him, since he was practically under his command, and in response, Lady Barthomeloi had decided that she would have a conversation with lady Archelot herself the next day, and that Shirou would tag along for it.

Not seeing a problem with that –his ability to sense lies would be very convenient for such a conversation– Shirou had accepted without a

fuss. They would speak to lady Archelot first, and then they would start the fight against the Meluastea in the Clocktower once it was confirmed that the Department of Botany was also in league with the criminals.

According to Lady Montmorency, lady Archelot's residence was close to the Clocktower, so there shouldn't be any problems with their plans. They would quickly visit lady Archelot and be back in time for the purge.

Now, one might ask themselves at this point, if that was all well-arranged and well-planned, then what was Shirou's problem? What was the issue of moderate severity that he had been rambling about before?

Quite simple. When Lady Montmorency had said that the residence of lady Archelot was only a five-minute walk away, Shirou had not expected that they would *actually be walking there!*

As in, he and the Vice-Director, Shirou and Lorelei Barthomeloi, walking through the streets of London together, side by side, as if they were a couple!

Lady Barthomeloi had arrived at the main entrance at eight o'clock sharp, without a single bodyguard –she had declared with the utmost confidence she didn't need them, and Shirou couldn't disagree with her on that– and had not hesitated for a second to lead Shirou outside, to *walk* towards the residence of lady Archelot.

Illya had been right! This was indeed like he was having a private outing with the Vice-Director! Illya had been right, and Shirou, who had been so sure that they would travel by car and that there would be many bodyguards accompanying them, had been utterly wrong.

Shirou had *no* idea what he should do. What did one do when one was walking with the Vice-Director, looking for all the world like they were on a date with her?

Because that *was* what it looked like. Even though most people didn't even give them a glance –the majority of people walking in London at eight in the morning had far more important things on their mind than looking at their fellow pedestrians– there were still some looks thrown their way from nosy people.

Worse than those looks however, were the mutterings he picked up here and there, mainly from old women.

'Cradle robber.' Was the term they used, referring to Lady Barthomeloi, or they used an even worse one: 'Pedophile.'

Conversely, not many people spoke ill of Shirou, or even really noticed him at all. He did get looks and people did mutter about him, but rather than scandalised old women, it was mainly men who did that, men who looked at him with gazes full of envy.

Those men were fools! There was nothing about him to be jealous of! That he was on an outing with the Vice-Director was something they should pity him for!

But then again, those men only saw the outward appearances, and there was no denying that the Vice-Director was gorgeous to a point almost any straight man would have been glad to have her walk next to him.

It was made even worse by the fact that Lady Barthomeloi was wearing entirely different clothes what than she normally did. Normally, she wore a shirt with a jacket over it, gloves on her hands, tight pants on her legs, and boots that came up to her thighs. Clothes that covered every inch of her skin except for her face, as was proper for ladies of high status.

Right now however, she was wearing a red shirt with short sleeves, leaving her arms bare, a black skirt under it that fell to just below her knees, and ankle boots on her feet. Her hair was tied into its usual ponytail though, with its usual ribbon keeping it in place. She had foregone her gloves entirely, leaving her hands bare as well.

Those clothes, combined with her confident tread, her graceful poise, her controlled demeanour, and natural beauty, made her look dangerously *hot*.

And Shirou wasn't talking about her body-temperature.

The fact that the way she walked also made her skirt flip up enough for him to periodically catch a glimpse of a creamy white thigh didn't make things any better.

At this point, even Shirou himself could almost picture them as being on a date together.

It was ridiculous of him to think that way, he knew that. One, he already had two girlfriends, whom he was very much loyal to, and two, she was a woman who stood at the top of the Magus Association in both Magical and political power. She could very well defeat him in battle, crush him in politics, or give him a Sealing Designation if she ever uncovered even one of his secrets.

By all rights, he should have wanted nothing to do with her, yet...

"Good gracious, mark me down as scared ánd horny."

Why did Shinji's words from when he had been violently rejected by a particularly muscular girl keep coming to mind?

"Is there something wrong?" As if she had picked up a trace of his thoughts, Lady Barthomeloi turned to him with a question, very quickly shocking him out of his pondering. "You seem to be preoccupied with something."

"Ah, no! Nothing's wrong! I was just..." Shirou began, hastily trying to think of a reason he was sunken in thought, before he had a flash of inspiration. "I was just wondering why you would bother going to lady Archelot's house yourself."

It was something he'd actually been wondering about for a while now. Lady Barthomeloi was decidedly *not* the type who'd bother to visit an old head of a possibly corrupt department herself to talk about said possible corruption. He may not have known her for long, but to do something like that was not in her character.

His question turned out to be a difficult one, or perhaps one that was too intrusive, as Lady Barthomeloi didn't reply for a while. Only after more than ten seconds did she open her mouth again.

"Normally, I would not do this." She agreed with him. "I would have taken your words seriously, as you have proven yourself to be trustworthy, and subjected the Department of Botany to a thorough investigation during the purge."

Shirou nodded. That did sound more like her.

"But lady Raquel Archelot..." Again, Lady Barthomeloi fell silent, unusually hesitant, before she suddenly grabbed him by his collar and pulled him into an alley. The next moment, Shirou felt Bounded Fields go up around them, but since he felt no aggression from Lady Barthomeloi, he didn't react to it. Still, he almost recoiled when Lady Barthomeloi levelled a glare at him that would have killed lesser men on the spot. "You will not as much as breathe a word about this conversation to anyone else!"

"Understood! My lips are sealed!" Shirou agreed instantly, his heart almost leaping into his throat at her incredibly threatening tone. He must have given off a truthful impression nonetheless however, as Lady Barthomeloi nodded in acceptance of his words.

"Lady Archelot is an old friend of my mother's." She continued, to which Shirou blinked his eyes in confusion. "She is also my godmother, though there has never been, and there never will be, a possibility for her to carry out that role."

"A friend of your mother?" Shirou asked, hoping he wasn't crossing a line but unable to keep his curiosity down. "But I thought the Barthomeloi didn't allow for contact outside of-?"

"My father was the Barthomeloi. My mother was not." Lady Barthomeloi said firmly. "Enough about this. I told you this because you had a right to know after I ordered you to come along to lady Archelot, but you do not require more information. We shall continue."

And that was that. The next moment, she'd dragged him onto the main street again and they continued their walk.

For a few minutes, it was silent between them, with Lady Barthomeloi not being in the mood to talk and Shirou being completely absorbed in the wealth of information she'd just given him, before the brunette suddenly spoke up again.

"Fujimaru." She began, this time not even bothering to turn her head to face him. "You are experienced in the matters of clandestine operations and stealth, correct?"

"I... do have some experience." Shirou nodded, trying to hide his pained expression at the thought of Rakurai.

"Would you say that the garments I have currently clad myself in have increased my ability to traverse the city without being noticed by any Magi who might be present in our vicinity?" She asked, finally turning her head the slightest bit towards him.

"Increased your ability to...?" Shirou mumbled, baffled by the question, before he realised what she was talking about. She was asking whether her clothes helped her in going undercover. "Ah, yes. I do think they help you go unnoticed. If there are any Magi present here, they would never expect the Vice-Director to be walking around without an escort and clad in... your current garments. As long as you don't attract attention, they will just see an unknown woman and won't give you a second glance."

"Exactly as Lady Montmorency predicted." Lady Barthomeloi nodded in satisfaction.

"...Lady Montmorency told you to wear those?!"

"Correct." Lady Barthomeloi nodded sharply, not noticing or perhaps ignoring his flabbergasted tone. "She reminded me of the necessity of 'keeping a low profile', as she described it, and suggested I should bedeck myself in these garments. I shall admit I doubted her, but if you concur with her opinion, then it was I who was ignorant."

"Right." Shirou mumbled, still stuck at the fact that it was Lady Montmorency who had made Lady Barthomeloi wear those clothes. What on Earth could that old woman have been thinking?!

"She also advised that we should mention the name of Barthomeloi as little as possible." Lady Barthomeloi then added. "I was not convinced of her reasoning before, but I am now."

"Don't mention the name...?" She just kept on surprising him. It was that she still looked entirely sincere, or he might have started to suspect she was messing with him. "Then what should I call you?"

"Lorelei will do." Lady Barthomeloi suddenly said something absolutely outrageous without batting an eyelash, and Shirou realised with shock and no small amount of horror she was being completely and utterly serious.

"B-But Lady Barthome-"

A fierce glare froze his tongue in place.

"L-Lorelei."

The glare let up, and there was a nod of satisfaction.

"Isn't that too familiar?" Shirou asked, feeling he had to at least try to restore some sanity even as it was likely a losing battle. "W-We barely know each other, a-and it isn't proper-"

Shirou tried making his case, but unfortunately for him, Lady Barthomeloi was not the kind of person who went back on what she said.

"During matters of intrigue, propriety has to be discarded, Shirou." She replied offhandedly, her use of his first name hitting him like a punch to the stomach.

"Is that what Lady Montmorency said?" He asked.

"Yes."

'Damn you, Lady Montmorency!' Shirou promptly cried out in his mind.

What on Earth was that old woman thinking?! Had she set this up?! But why?! What did she gain from making this so awkward for him?! Was she just enjoying herself right now by imagining how flustered he had to be?!

The longer he knew the second-in-command of the Department of Policies, the less respectable she seemed to become. Was she a distinguished policymaker, law-enforcer, and administrator, or was she a wacky grandmother with a puppeteer hobby?

The answer to that question was no longer as clear cut as it had previously been.

To think that that woman would set up a situation in such a way that he would have to address the Vice-Director as Lorelei... It was incredible, and not in a good way.

Fortunately, he didn't have to address her so familiarly a second time, for it was only seconds later that they arrived at their destination.

"We are here." Lady Barthomeloi announced as they stopped in front of a very cosy looking terraced house. It had a very small front garden, a hedge that formed the barrier between said garden and the street, and a gate that let visitors pass beyond the hedge. The distance between gate and front door couldn't be more than two metres though, further indicating how small the garden was.

The house itself had three floors. It had large windows, though the one on the ground floor was shielded off by the hedge, ensuring no one could look inside. The walls had been made out of bricks, which gave them a good, old-fashioned look.

To any normal human, it would have looked no different from the many other terraced houses that could be found all over London. Just another place of residence for one of the many inhabitants of the city.

Shirou however saw far more than that. He saw through the walls and doors and could thus see that this house was filled with exquisite furniture and many other riches, befitting of a former head of a ruling family. He also saw the Bounded Fields and other Spells keeping the property safe. He smelled the Magical Energy radiating from the place, and he could discern that this house had been in the possession of Magi since it had been built, which was more than three hundred years ago.

Shirou could also see however that the house was positively *drenched* in evil. The foulness and horror covered the walls like black stains, and the smell was excruciating.

Even though that evil had been committed far in the past, the perpetrators having died centuries ago, and the evil power had lost all potency, it was still enough to make Shirou recoil in disgust.

Then he spotted the sword that hung from a wall inside, and his disgust became even worse.

The sword was a Mystic Code. A Mystic Code with a potent disintegration-Spell on it. If someone was stabbed with that sword, then their entire body would start falling apart at the seams. Essentially, the victim would turn to ash, slowly and painfully, starting from the wound and then continuing until there was nothing left of the body.

It was a nasty sword, made by a very nasty man. A man who also happened to be responsible for most of the evil drenching the house, and who had gone by the name of Pietrich Archelot.

Pietrich Archelot had been a violent, cruel, and hateful man, who had wished nothing but pain and misery on any enemy, real or imagined. He had been the head of the Archelot-family two centuries ago, and it had been a dark time for them, even by Magus standards.

The man had eventually been put down by an Archibald, who had destroyed most of Pietrich's weapons as well, but a few of his nasty creations, such as that sword, had survived.

'Judging the concept of creation.'

As Shirou looked at the weapon, a copy of it immediately appeared in his Inner World, standing next to countless mundane knives, a few swords from museums, and a large number of other blade-shaped Mystic Codes that had come mainly from Shirou's Vault.

'Hypothesizing the basic structure.'

The copy was far from perfect however. It was immensely good, to a point no other modern Magus could hope to do the same, but it was still inferior to the real thing.

'Duplicating the composition material.'

As Shirou continued looking at the sword though, the copy in his Inner World seemed to become better and better. With every second, the image became sharper, more defined, and more like the original.

'Imitating the skill of its making.'

Something incredible was taking place, something that had never been done before in all of the Modern Age. A Mystic Code was being copied on the spot, and with just a bit more time, it could become a perfect copy.

'Sympathizing with the experience of its growth.'

Shirou could see more and more as he continued looking at the sword, and after six steps, he was almost at the point where he would be able to Project a perfect copy. Only two more steps remained...

'Reproducing... something.'

But at the last moment, Shirou's unfamiliarity with the Spell he was using tripped him up.

'Excelling... Excelling every...'

The attempt ended in failure.

The copy in his Inner World was so good as to be indistinguishable from the original to any Magus who didn't specialise in Mystic Codes, but it wasn't perfectly similar, and Shirou, who was largely unaware of what had just taken place, felt a sudden feeling of irritation bubble up inside of him.

Irritation that came from a place deep, *deep* inside of his Soul.

"I understand, Shirou." Lady Barthomeloi suddenly spoke up, and Shirou's heart just about stopped in shock when he realised she was still standing next to him, had been standing next to him since he had zoned out, and had now been witness to him standing around like an idiot, staring dopily at a wall for a solid minute.

"U-Understand?" He almost squeaked, hoping against hope she wasn't too irritated by his absentmindedness. "W-What do you understand?"

"That this is certainly not a place for a member of a ruling-family to live in." Lady Barthomeloi clarified, turning her nose up at the building. "I too am astonished by the lack of respect shown to lady Archelot."

Wait, she thought he'd been staring at the wall because he was surprised that the house was so unimpressive?

Well, okay, sure, if that's what she wanted to believe, Shirou was not going to disabuse her of that notion.

He did strongly disagree with her opinion, as the house looked perfectly fine to him, but perhaps this was not the time to bring that up.

"Lady Archelot led the Department of Botany for three decades, with patience, skill, and wisdom." Lady Barthomeloi continued, her expression becoming more difficult to read. "Yet at the end of her life, her family put her away in the worst building that they possess, outside of the Clocktower, and cut all connections with her. I had known about it before, but I thought they were merely ungrateful. Now I am not so sure."

"Could they have put her here to get rid of her? Because she protested against their increasingly illegal activities?" Shirou asked, realising what she was hinting at.

"Yes, and to snub her as well." Lady Barthomeloi nodded, giving the house another glare. "This house seems acceptable on the outside, but I have no doubt that you have already perceived the evil and foulness that lie on it like a Curse. For more than a century, the Archelot have kept it sealed off, fearing its fell power, yet now they have banished their former head to this place, condemning her to die in darkness."

So it had not been the house itself but the Curses on it that had made Lady Barthomeloi turn her nose up at the sight of it? It hadn't been arrogance but a distaste for lingering evil that made her clack her tongue in distaste?

Shirou had misjudged her, clearly, in believing that it had been arrogance, and though he would never admit out loud that he had had any opinion of her that was unflattering, he did offer his apologies mentally.

Now, would he offer to remove the evil that lied in the house? He could do it, the Cleansing Power would make short work of the lingering traces of Pietrich Archelot and his cronies, but he hesitated on going through with it. It was not his house after all, and the owner might not look kindly on him suddenly throwing massive amounts of power around.

"Would you like me to remove the taint?" He thus offered to Lady Barthomeloi, figuring he couldn't go wrong if he followed her recommendation.

"That is possible?" She asked, before lifting an impressed eyebrow when he nodded. "You have my blessing, but I would advise you to consult lady Archelot on the matter as well."

"Of course. Shall we go inside then?"

"We shall. We have wasted enough time here."

With that, they went inside. Naturally, Shirou let Lady Barthomeloi go first, both because it was simple good manners to let a lady go first and because lady Archelot was less likely to activate the Bounded Fields if it was the Vice-Director visiting her rather than a random kid.

And indeed, with Lady Barthomeloi taking point, they safely reached the front door, where she knocked several times.

It was several seconds later that the door was opened, and it was opened by a ravishingly handsome young man wearing a butler-outfit, who, upon recognising who stood before him, momentarily widened his eyes in shock, before immediately composing himself again.

"My lady Vice-Director." The man spoke in a smooth, baritone voice, befitting of his large size, before he bowed. "And the lady Vice-Director's companion. Welcome to the residence of lady Raquel Archelot. Please, enter."

He did not ask why they were here, but Shirou supposed one didn't just deny entrance to the Queen of the Clocktower, even if she showed up without an appointment. Perks of being Lorelei Barthomeloi and all that.

Lady Barthomeloi stepped inside without missing a beat, and Shirou followed after her. They had no coats to hand over to the man, with it being a warm sunny day, but they did take off their shoes.

Then they followed the... butler? Manservant? Personal assistant? Further into the house, until they arrived in the lavishly decorated drawing room. There, an old lady, though not nearly as old as Lady Montmorency, was waiting for them, sitting in a golden chair with a perfect poise and her hands folded in her lap.

When Lady Barthomeloi entered the room however, she was quick to rise.

"My lady Vice-Director." She said, bowing to Lady Barthomeloi as well as she could, though it was clear her body was working against her. "I

am honoured by your visit. Truly honoured. Benjamin, pour three glasses of the 1897 wine, at once."

"As you wish, lady Raquel." The butler, Benjamin, nodded, before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Lady Archelot." Lady Barthomeloi replied to the greeting, and Shirou blinked once in surprise when a very peculiar undertone entered the Vice-Director's words. It was almost... sad? "You have my gratitude for your warm welcome."

Lady Barthomeloi was sad?

"Please, Lady Barthomeloi, you and your companion can take a seat." Lady Archelot gestured at the chairs that were scattered throughout the drawing room, and Shirou, having been raised well by his father, first grabbed a chair for Lady Barthomeloi and then one for himself. In the meantime, lady Archelot sat down again on her golden chair as well.

Once they were all seated, Lady Barthomeloi wasted not a moment in making introductions.

"This is Shirou Fujimaru." She introduced him shortly. "Fujimaru, this is lady Raquel Archelot, former head of the Archelot-family, and former head of the Department of Botany."

"It is an honour to meet you, young Fujimaru." Lady Archelot rasped, looking curiously at him.

"The honour is all mine, Lady Archelot." Shirou replied, bowing his head in respect towards an elder.

Lady Archelot smiled warmly, and yes, it was actual warmth, and then she turned towards Lady Barthomeloi again.

"It has been a while, my lady." She spoke, and Shirou could swear he saw her eyes turning slightly misty. "I have not seen you since..."

"Since that day." Lady Barthomeloi nodded, sitting on her seat as if it was burning her, her body coiled and ready to jump up at any second. "I was... I regret that you were banished here so soon after that day. We... There was much to discuss between us."

"Banished?" Lady Archelot raised an eyebrow as if she had no idea what Lady Barthomeloi was talking about, and Shirou immediately picked up on the lie. "I assure you I went here quite voluntarily."

"Fujimaru?" Lady Barthomeloi asked sharply.

"That was not true." Shirou stated his findings, and Lady Barthomeloi seemed not surprised in the slightest to hear it.

"Not true?" Lady Archelot raised an eyebrow, the faintest hint of unease showing at the edges of her expression. "I assure you, mister Fujimaru, that no one forced me to go here-"

"Mister Fujimaru's ability to discern lies from truth is flawless, lady Archelot." Lady Barthomeloi cut her off. "If he tells me that you lie, I am inclined to believe it. Especially when it matches the rest of our evidence."

"Evidence?" Lady Archelot didn't seem to be following what they were talking about anymore, but the panic in her expression was nevertheless increasing rapidly. "You have been collecting evidence about me?"

"The Meluastea have gone too far." Lady Barthomeloi stated in lieu of an answer. "They have violated every law and edict of the Clocktower. They have turned traitor against the Magus Association. They shall be purged today, and all their followers with them. The Departments of Archaeology and Mineralogy will be scoured clean of that family and all its influences, and so will the Department of Botany, which has been accused of being in league with the Meluastea."

Lady Archelot's eyes widened until they were as big as saucers, and then her expression turned resigned. Resigned, tired, and depressed.

"You know then?" She asked calmly, before sighing when Lady Barthomeloi nodded. "Of course. I always knew that you would find out sooner or later. In a way, it's almost a relief that you have."

"How could you let the Meluastea take over your department?" Lady Barthomeloi demanded, no longer doubting Shirou's accusations now that lady Archelot had outright admitted they were true. "Your record was impeccable, your sense of duty immaculate. You were good and true."

"Ha!" Lady Archelot scoffed, her lips forming a wry smile. "And what if I was? It didn't do much good when the hounds came. I had always known somewhere in my gut that I should have drowned Jack Colby the moment he met my poor granddaughter, but I let him court her, and now he has taken everything from me."

"Jack Colby? Heir of the Colby-family?" Lady Barthomeloi asked. Shirou did not know this Colby-family, but from the way both ladies were frowning, they couldn't be very popular.

"That is the one." Lady Archelot nodded, making a dismissive motion with her hand. "A rather insignificant family, or at least they were, before the heir got ambitious and hooked his claws into my sweet Marianne, who I had just made my heir. With her firmly under his control, with the backing of the Meluastea and aided by the Archelot-family members who'd wanted to see me gone for years, he drove me out."

"Then you should have come to me at once." Lady Barthomeloi stated, her hands slowly balling into fists. "I would have helped you gain back your position as head of the family, and I would have put the traitors down like the dogs they are. That you didn't tell me about the Meluastea's actions was foolish, and treasonous besides."

"I know." Lady Archelot nodded, accepting the rebuke without protest. "I should have gone to you. Undoubtedly, it would have prevented much misery and pain. But I didn't, not because I am no longer loyal, but because I couldn't condemn my family to a gruesome end."

"That..." Lady Barthomeloi's frown became even deeper. "That would not have been guaranteed to happen."

"You know the rules and so do I." Lady Archelot replied, crossing her arms in an almost defiant motion. "Had I gone to you, half of my family, my poor granddaughter included, would have been executed. What was left of the Archelot would have been deposed and would be cast down to live in shame for the rest of our existence. I could not see that happen, not because of my actions."

"So you left?" Lady Barthomeloi demanded, her eyes flitting around the room. "You let yourself be banished to this place, the place you hated, by Colby?"

"Essentially." Lady Archelot nodded.

Lady Barthomeloi's nostrils flared, and Shirou realised with shock that this was the most emotional he'd ever seen the Vice-Director become. Her emotionless exterior, normally so perfect, was showing cracks all over, and she looked like she was about to lose it completely.

Perhaps seeing that as well, lady Archelot rose from her chair...

Before kneeling in front of Lady Barthomeloi, so deeply that her forehead pressed against the ground.

"I do not expect forgiveness, or a lenient sentence, for me or my family." She spoke to Lady Barthomeloi, who had been taken aback enough by the gesture for her budding anger to be cooled again. "I am ready to pay for my crimes, and the downfall of my family has been inevitable since the day Colby took my poor Marianne as his wife. I shall not ask for mercy, or for my family to keep its position. I merely ask that you show mercy to Marianne, and Marianne alone."

It was a heartfelt plea made by a tired, old woman, who had given up on everything she had or used to have and could only plead for her granddaughter's life.

It was quite moving, and it left Lady Barthomeloi at a complete loss.

Not that it was surprising. Shirou figured it was Lady Montmorency who normally dealt with nuanced stuff like this, while Lady Barthomeloi only cracked the heads of those who had been sentenced to death.

Now that Lady Barthomeloi had to weigh the law against her own morals, and weigh her hurt sense of pride against her lingering fondness for her mother's best friend, she had no idea what to do.

As such, she did what every Barthomeloi tended to do in such situations; Let someone else decide.

"Fujimaru." Lady Barthomeloi thus spoke up, and Shirou turned towards her, a bit surprised by the fact she was suddenly addressing him. "What would you make of this?"

'Wait! Hold on! That's your job!' Shirou spluttered mentally, incredulous that he was suddenly being put forward as the one who would make the ideas.

On the outside though, he remained cool, pretending to think deeply, desperately trying to channel his inner Rin, before blurting out what first came to mind.

"Since you are doing lady Archelot a favour, she will repay you by working for the Department of Policies for the rest of her life. I'm sure Lady Montmorency can find something to do for such a talented person." He began, figuring that having that as his first idea couldn't hurt, and he was rewarded when Lady Barthomeloi nodded approvingly. "Naturally, all Archelot who are willingly involved with the Meluastea need to go down."

"Naturally." Lady Barthomeloi agreed.

"Nothing would please me more." Lady Raquel also had no problems with that stipulation.

"Jack Colby needs to be removed from the board as quickly as possible, so that he is no longer Marianne's husband. He will be replaced by someone of your choice, Lady Barthomeloi, who will ensure that Marianne leads the Archelot-family into a direction of your choosing."

"Hm." There was a slight smile on Lady Barthomeloi's face now, and lady Archelot sighed in relief at the news that her granddaughter wouldn't be executed in Shirou's plans.

"Then, when the Meluastea are gone and Marianne is married to someone who is loyal to the Barthomeloi, the Department of Botany can be brought back into the fold. Some restructuring to ensure something like won't happen again might be in order though." Shirou finished. "I would advise breaking the department into several parts that are each headed by a different person to ensure that none of them can gather enough power to do something foolish again."

It wasn't a great plan, and a lot of it depended on the assumption that Marianne Archelot was indeed being forced or manipulated into going along with her husband instead of having chosen to do so herself, but it was the best he could do on such a short notice.

Fortunately, Lady Barthomeloi seemed to approve.

"A simple, yet elegant plan." She smiled appreciatively. "We shall carry it out. Take note however, lady Archelot, that I give no guarantees this will end well. If the plan fails, I will still execute every last Archelot without hesitation, including you and your granddaughter."

Ah yes, that was more like the Lady Barthomeloi he knew. Shirou had been getting worried for a bit there, with her being so kind and all, but it seemed everything was normal again.

"I understand." Lady Archelot rose from her kneeling position and nodded in acceptance to Lady Barthomeloi's terms. "May I inquire who you have in mind for my granddaughter to marry?"

"There are several options, but I make no commitment until I have discussed this with Lady Montmorency." Lady Barthomeloi replied, her voice allowing no argument.

"Of course." Lady Archelot nodded in acceptance again, before glancing over at Shirou for a moment, though she shook her head immediately after. "No, not that one. I gather that one is yours."

"Lady Archelot?" Lady Barthomeloi lifted an eyebrow in confusion, but the lady merely shook her head again.

It was at this point that Benjamin the butler finally returned with the drinks, the taciturn, discrete man having waited until the bulk of the negotiations were over with before entering the room and disturbing the atmosphere. With prim and proper movements, he handed them their glasses of wine, before disappearing again just as quickly.

Shirou, who'd never had wine before, curiously tasted the red liquid, and he found that it was pretty good.

'Not as good as Mjod though.'

The thought suddenly entered his mind, though that thought was nonsense, since Shirou had never drunk Mjod in his life. He didn't even know what Mjod was.

Lady Archelot and Lady Barthomeloi spoke for a few minutes longer, but duty called and the agenda for the day was very full, so before

long, Shirou and the Vice-Director were already preparing to leave again.

"I wish you the best of luck with the purge." Lady Archelot said, smiling at the sight of Shirou using the Cleansing Power to remove the lingering traces of evil on her house. "Be careful."

Lady Barthomeloi nodded back, and then, when Shirou was done, turned around without another word.

"Remember, Shirou." She then said when they left lady Archelot's house. "For the duration of our walk back to the Clocktower, you shall address me as Lorelei."

"O-Of course, L-Lorelei." Shirou nodded obediently, immediately resolving not to address her by name at all during the trip.

In the end, he only had to say her name three more times, and then he had reached the Clocktower again in one piece.

This day had already been nerve-wrecking and exhausting, and it was only a little after nine in the morning yet.

It didn't promise to become any easier either.

"Waver? Where are you going? Waver? Don't ignore your little sister!"

Waver sighed as Reines followed him out of his office, sticking to him like glue, insisting he tell her what was going on, why he had been so busy over the past weeks, where he had been over the past three days, and what he was going to do now.

The little she-devil had invaded his office at seven o'clock in the morning, probably hoping to catch him while he was asleep so he would be off-balance and on the backfoot during her interrogation, but she had been disappointed to find him awake and ready for her.

Not only had he already expected such a move from her, but he also had to participate in a purge at nine, so his sheer nerves over that had awoken him at six. In other words, he had been completely prepared and had rebuffed her every attempt at demanding the truth.

"Waver! Waver, please!" The little minx also knew that her attempt at cajoling him while he was half-asleep had failed, so now she was trying to plead with him, grabbing his hand in hers and looking up at him with dewy eyes. "Big brother! You have to tell me! Please! Please! Pleeaaaaaase!"

"Fine!" Waver barked, conscious of the people they passed as they walked through the halls of the Department of Modern Magical Theories. He liked to think that the people of his own department could be trusted, but he had no certainty, so caution was warranted. "I will tell you, but only when we arrive at our destination."

"Destination?" Reines' ears perked up at the first clue Waver had given her so far, but then she shook her head. "No, no, I get it. The walls have ears and all. Very well, I'll wait. Can you tell me though where your adorable apprentice is? It's been three days since I saw her, and I really need some quality Grey-time."

"She will be there too. I sent her out earlier to gather the people involved, and she will either already be there or she'll arrive there shortly."

"Wherever 'there' is." Reines remarked with a sly smile, before she let go of his hand and hugged herself instead, as if imagining that she was hugging someone else. "Uwah, I can't wait to see little Grey again, I'll hug her to death."

"Please don't do that." Waver snapped. "I want my apprentice alive. Besides, you shouldn't call her 'little Grey' when she's taller than you."

"Only by a little bit." Reines protested, demonstratively holding out her thumb and index finger at a short distance from each other to indicate how little. "And she's cute, so yeah."

"What is it with you these days?" Waver turned to face Reines, walking slower as he glared at her in suspicion. "Why are you suddenly so fond of Grey?"

"Oh, I've always been fond of her, but I do understand what you mean. I wasn't as open about it before." Reines nodded, boldly meeting his gaze with a perfectly innocent smile. "You see, it's because of Fujimaru."

"Fujimaru?" Waver blinked in surprise, not able to see how that boy could have anything to do with how Reines behaved. "Because he helped you with your spells?"

"No, I am grateful to him for that, but it's not what I meant." Reines shook her head resolutely, before her smile turned sly. "I talked with him once about marriage, and he let it slip that he had two girlfriends, and that he plans on marrying both of them."

"Good for him." Waver nodded, not surprised that Fujimaru was being over the top even in romance. "But I don't see what that has to do with-"

"So that got me thinking." Reines continued, effortlessly talking over him. "It is obvious that Grey has a crush on you, and before, that was a problem for me, since I intend to marry you myself, but now that Fujimaru has shown me the way, I decided that I will take you both."

"Wha-?"

"So I will flirt with Grey by showing her physical affection, and I'll take her shopping and stuff, and you I will flirt with like I did before, by bullying you, and then, when I have you two in my pocket, I'll marry the two of you. I would throw in Lehrman as well, but I get the idea you actually don't like her, so-"

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!?" Waver screamed, his face exploding into a blush as Reines blurted out something absolutely, totally outrageous. "What do you think you're playing at, Reines?!"

"Ahahahahaha! I'm joking, I'm joking." Reines quickly assured him, laughing merrily at the sight of his bright-red face. "I'm just teasing you, Waver."

"T-This goes too far for mere tea-"

"Or am I?" Reines suddenly asked, all traces of amusement gone as she gave him a penetrating gaze. "I like you, and I like Grey. Why wouldn't I want you at my side for the rest of my life?"

"...Don't say ridiculous things you don't even mean." Waver sniffed, turning away from his fiend of a boss and picking up speed again,

deciding that this conversation held no more value. "Now come, we cannot be late."

Resolutely facing forward as he was, Waver missed how Reines smiled sadly at his back, and he definitely missed the whisper that fell from her lips.

"Who says I didn't mean it?"

But then she shook her head, gathered her resolve again, and followed after him. All feelings and plans for the future aside, something big was about to happen, and Reines would be damned if she allowed herself to miss it.

By the time Reines caught up with him, Waver had made it to his destination. The previous day, Lady Montmorency, Lady Barthomeloi, Fujimaru, and he had agreed to meet at nine o'clock to begin the purge. The place where they would meet was right in front of the main entrance of the Department of Archaeology, so they could begin the attack on the enemy's main stronghold at once.

Waver was perfectly on time when he arrived at said place, yet he found that he wasn't the first one to arrive. Or the second. Or the third.

Lady Montmorency was already there, wearing some kind of body armour and with a bundle of papers in her hands that she was slowly paging through. Around her, a group of Enforcers, Policy-personnel, and other warriors had taken position, having placed themselves in such a way that they could prevent anyone from leaving or entering the Department of Archaeology while also providing maximum protection to Lady Montmorency.

Waver didn't know most of the Enforcers, but he recognised George Wesley, Ronald Shacklebolt, Gunter de Vries, Gerard Johnson, and a smattering of other individuals, though most of them he knew only by name and face.

He was more familiar with Gideon and his crew, who were also standing there. Just like they'd said, they had found a way to involve themselves further into the matter with Meluastea, and Waver was glad to see that they had. They were a good team filled with reliable people, and there were few others who he'd rather have at his back during a fight.

Of course, they wouldn't be having his back, they would be in the thick of the fighting while he remained behind, but it was the thought that counted.

Another thing he noticed was that the entrance of the Department of Archaeology had been closed. The hallway was normally open and only lightly protected by several Bounded Fields, to allow entrance to its members and possible guests, but now, it was now shut tight by immense, blue-coloured gates.

The gates were of course covered in countless Bounded Fields of all kinds, and had been made out of a mixture of steel, crystals, and gems. From the looks of it, it would take the people gathered here at least eight hours to get through them.

Really, Archaeology always got the nice toys. They didn't have gates like that at the Department of Modern Magecraft Theories. They didn't even have fences, only a few Bounded Fields that served to keep interlopers out.

Waver felt cheated.

"Urk!"

Meanwhile, Reines seemed to finally realise that whatever he was involved with, it was serious business. Instead of demanding he explain, like she'd undoubtedly planned to do once they reached their destination, she kept her mouth shut, sticking close to him as she looked with barely hidden suspicion and anxiety at Lady Montmorency.

"Sir, over here!"

Waver's attention was pulled away from Reines when he heard Grey's voice call out to him –the sound of it was quite distinctive, for she was one of the only people he knew who could make her voice sound like she was whispering even when she was shouting– and he turned to face his apprentice, seeing her walk up to him with Svin, Flat, Bazett, and miss Ortensia in tow.

"Grey." He smiled. "I am glad to see that-"

"What about me?! Are you glad to see me, my love?!"

"Lehrman?!" Waver reared back in shock when the pink-haired demonette appeared from behind the boys, waving excitably at him. "What are you doing here?! Grey, what is she doing here?!"

"I'm sorry, Sir." The hooded girl apologised profusely. "She demanded to know where we'd been over the past three days, and when I refused to tell her, she decided to follow us. I'm really, really sorry."

"It is alright, Grey. I am not mad." Waver sighed, already regretting to have yelled at the skittish girl. "Well, I *am* mad, but only at Lehrman."

"Ah, Waver, my love, please let me help you!" Said pink-haired girl called out, bringing her hands together in a begging motion. "I will do everything you say! Feel free to use me in whatever way you want! Just let me stay! Please!"

"Let the girl participate, Waver." Flat decided to take pity on the girl, for some nebulous reason. "You can use her as an extra bodyguard if nothing else."

"Ugh, fine." Waver barked, having no desire to waste energy on convincing the girl to leave, especially not if the boys were on her side. "You can stay, Lehrman, as long as you stick close to me at all times, and do not interfere in anything without my explicit permission."

"Yes! I will!" Lehrman cried in joy, immediately hopping over to stand next to him, giving him a salute once she was by his side. "I will guard you with my life, Waver, my dearest."

Waver couldn't suppress a tired groan, and he pointedly looked away from Lehrman, letting his gaze pass over Svin, Bazett, and miss Ortensia, who were making their own preparations for the upcoming battle, until it fell on Reines and Grey.

"Grey, my darling! I missed you so much!" True to her word, Reines was embracing Grey strongly, latched on to her like a barnacle, having thrown her arms around Grey's body while pressing her face into Grey's shoulder. "Don't ever scare me like that again! I thought you'd left me forever!"

"Ah? N-No!" Grey spluttered, looking utterly flummoxed by Reines's behaviour. "Sir and I were just on a mission from Lady Barthomeloi. W-We couldn't tell anyone about it, s-so..."

"So you left me behind without a word?" Reines wailed as tears streamed down her cheeks, acting every bit the abandoned kitten. She was exaggerating to a point where it became almost embarrassing, yet Grey completely fell for it.

"I'm so sorry, lady Reines." She apologised profusely, awkwardly hugging the other girl back. "If there's anything I can do to make up for it-"

"Why, there is!" Reines beamed, her tears disappearing like snow under the sun, not a trace left of her earlier 'sadness' as she withdrew from the hug and tightly held Grey's hand instead. "You can tell me what you and my dearest brother have been working on over the past weeks. I know he spoke with the Church, and that Lady Barthomeloi sent you on a trip, but other than that, I haven't been able to discover anything at all."

"W-Well, it was sort of the point that it would remain secret." Grey stammered, before she nervously licked her lips, and began explaining. "It all started when miss Bazett came to visit Sir with news about Mundane Dead Apostles..."

Grey began to explain the whole matter to Reines, which suited Waver just fine, as it meant he wouldn't have to spend time on explaining it himself, and he turned away from the duo to see Gideon walking towards them. The Enforcer looked quite happy, and Rit, his blonde girlfriend who followed a few paces behind, looked positively ecstatic.

"Lord El-Melloi." Gideon greeted him, taking Waver's hand in his own for a strong shake. "I am glad to meet you again."

"Sir Gideon, the pleasure is entirely mine." Waver answered, happy to see someone who was at least a bit normal. "Were there any problems in delivering the prisoners to their destination?"

"None whatsoever." Gideon replied, glancing back at Lady Montmorency. "After we brought them to England by boat, we took them to the Clocktower with very little fuss. To be honest, we did expect to have trouble finding a place to keep them, but it turns out the Department of Policies has immense underground dungeons, and Lady Montmorency had us imprison them there."

"...Immense underground dungeons?" Waver sweatdropped at the news, and both Gideon and Rit nodded in agreement, their expressions as pained as Waver's felt at the moment.

"But never mind that." Gideon then brushed the matter of the dungeons aside. "After we delivered the prisoners, we asked Lady Montmorency if we could join the mission to take down the Meluastea, and she agreed, so here we are."

"We're ready, sir, Lady Montmorency already filled us in on what will happen and how it will take place." Rit grinned, bouncing in place, clearly eager to start. "The Meluastea won't know what hit them."

"I'm sure they won't." Waver agreed kindly.

"I have a question." Lehrman, who was still standing to Waver's left and slightly behind him, suddenly piped up, raising her hand as if she was in class.

"Speak then, Lehrman." Waver nodded, figuring he owed her at least some form of explanation if she was going to be his bodyguard.

"I have heard enough to gather that we're going after the Meluastea." Lehrman began, crossing her arms and closing her one visible eye in thought. "I won't ask why, since I am pretty sure I already know, but what I wanted to ask is, why are we just standing here?"

"You mean, why are we waiting here instead of attacking?" Gideon asked, to which he received a nod from the pink-haired girl. "Because we are waiting for several important people, like Lady Barthomeloi and Fujimaru, to arrive. We cannot start without them."

"I know it is frustrating, but we need Lorelei and Fujimaru if we want to stand a chance at really striking these people down in an acceptably short time." Rit added, showing her strange tendency to call the Vice-Director by her first name again. "Fujimaru is the best sensor we have, and Lorelei has the authority needed to allow us all to start wrecking a Department or two."

"Right." Lehrman mumbled, glancing at the Department of Archaeology, which seemed to be utterly vacant still. "Are you not afraid they'll try to flee while we wait here?"

"They are free to try, but Lady Montmorency has kill-teams watching every entrance of the Clocktower." Waver explained, remembering what she had told him the previous day. "Them leaving their Workshops will only make things easier for us, and I have no doubt that they know that too."

"They have undoubtedly spotted us already, but rather than fleeing, they are probably bunkering down right now." Gideon added, combing a hand through his black hair. "For a Magus, staying within their Workshops and trying to sit out the storm is the best option they have. They probably hope they can give us enough trouble to force us to negotiate with them."

"Not that we will." Rit scoffed. "We're going to drag them out of their Workshops, and we'll throw them into those creepy dungeons under the Department of Policies."

"Should you really call them creepy?" Waver sighed at the frank description. "That might be seen as insulting."

"Not at all." A new voice piped up from behind them, a sly smile audible in every word. "Those dungeons really are creepy."

Waver froze when the new voice joined the discussion, for it was a voice he recognised, a voice that was accompanied by the feeling of a snake slithering around his feet.

For the shortest of moments, Waver furiously hoped that he had simply misheard, and that the person behind them wasn't who he feared it was, but then he turned around, and his hopes were dashed.

"Adashino." He spat at the kimono-clad woman that had appeared behind him. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Ara? I am merely doing my job, Lord El-Melloi II." The black-haired, Japanese woman replied, giving him a large, closed-eyed smile. "When a ruling-family is about to fall, I can hardly sit around doing nothing. I have a duty to the Department of Policies after all, and I am here to help in the war-effort."

"You mean you are here to amuse yourself." Waver scoffed, not believing the woman's words for a second. "That's all you care about, snake."

Hishiri Adashino was an old acquaintance of Waver. The story behind how they met was long and complicated, but it ultimately all boiled down to her trying to kill him because she thought he might be a potential troublemaker, before he managed to convince her that he was a law-abiding Magus with no intentions of breaking any rules.

She was a tall, beautiful woman, with graceful, Japanese features, though her beauty was marred by the mocking look that was always present on her face and the snake-like feeling she permanently exuded. The fact that she worked for the Department of Policies also didn't help.

She seemed to derive a vicious pleasure from interfering with Waver's business as much as she could, and every time he went on a mission, there was a considerable chance Adashino would be waiting in the wings, eager to make things more difficult for him.

Waver disliked her a fair bit, but because she was an officer of the Department of Policies, he had always been forced to be polite to her and listen to her orders. Even when she did outrageous things, double-crossed him, or just plain was a pain in his rear, she was the boss and he had to listen.

Now though, things were different. He had the backing of Lady Montmorency, and the knowledge that his second apprentice was absolutely vital for the coming operation. As such, he felt secure in being a bit ruder to her than he'd normally be.

"Snake?" Adashino gasped in poorly faked shock, before she playfully narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you sure it is wise to mouth off like that-"

"Adashino!" Lady Montmorency suddenly barked from where she stood, glaring down at the tall woman even though she was a fair bit shorter and at least twenty metres away.

"Yes, ma'am?" Adashino immediately turned towards her superior, straightening her back and adopting a serious expression.

"Shut up."

"...Yes, ma'am." Adashino was clearly surprised by the order, but she didn't dare disobey it, and thus fell silent.

"Right." Waver nodded, trying and failing to hide his grin. "Where was I before I was so rudely interrupted?"

Another prick at the woman, one Waver enjoyed very much, especially since she could only glare powerlessly in return. Still, however much he might like 'mouthing off', he knew that he should firmly keep himself in check. Even if he had all the power now, he shouldn't abuse it too much, lest Adashino strike back twice as hard the next time they met, when she would probably be in charge again.

As such, he moved the subject along.

"To get back to your question, Lehrman, no, the Meluastea and their allies won't run. They are too proud, too careful, or too scared to try to flee. Even if we'd sent them a letter detailing our plans to attack them, they would not have fled." Waver declared with the utmost confidence.

"I agree with Lord El-Melloi's assessment." Gideon nodded, before he placed a hand on Rit's shoulder and lifted the other hand to point at something behind Waver. "Now, I think it is time for us to go. We still have some stuff to prepare, and I think you need to have a word with Sisigou before we start."

"Sisigou?" Waver lifted an eyebrow, and followed Gideon's pointed finger to...

A man. And not just any man, but a bear of a man with biker clothes and hair like the mane of a lion. This man, who Waver didn't know, looked like a rugged warrior, and the fact that he was talking to Grey and Reines set his teeth on edge.

"Kairi Sisigou." Gideon said by way of explanation when he saw Waver didn't know who the man was. "One of the best mercenaries the Moonlit World has to offer. I guess he's here to earn some easy money."

"Easy money?" Waver spluttered, gaping at the black-haired Enforcer. "Attacking a ruling family is not easy."

"To Sisigou, it is." Gideon shrugged, with a 'what can you do'-look on his face.

"When it comes to mercenary-work, Kairi Sisigou doesn't lose out to anyone." Rit elaborated on her boyfriend's statement. "In pure effectiveness, the Magus Killer would still have him beat, but Sisigou's a lot more pleasant to work with than that man, or at least, that's what I heard."

"I wonder why he's talking to your apprentices." Gideon rubbed his chin in thought, before he shrugged. "Not my problem though. You should go and find out, Lord El-Melloi."

"Then that is what I will do." Waver agreed, nodding a quick goodbye to the two Enforcers, before marching over to Grey, Reines, and Sisigou, closely followed by Lehrman and Adashino, who, despite the fact she wasn't allowed to talk, still seemed to derive plenty of amusement from the current situation.

"-Should tell me a bit more about those Gravekeeper secret of yours, little lady." Waver heard Sisigou say once he got close enough to overhear them. "I'll trade them for some Necromancy spells."

"A-Ah, I would have to talk with Sir about that." Grey replied, nervously rubbing her hands together as she stood half behind Reines, who was levelling a very unimpressed stare at the lion-maned mercenary. "A-Also, I don't think this is the time."

"It certainly is not." Waver agreed as he came to stand next to Sisigou. "Lord El-Melloi the Second. I heard you are Kairi Sisigou?"

"The one and only." Sisigou grinned confidently, before flashing a thumbs-up at Grey. "And don't worry about my offer, little lady. It was entirely open-ended, no pressure. If you don't want to, we won't share anything."

"Ah." Grey nodded with a relieved sigh.

"So, Lord El-Melloi, hah? I thought you'd be taller." Sisigou turned back to Waver, looking him over with an inspecting eye. "Your reputation precedes you, but you don't look like much of a warrior to me."

"..." Waver would have liked to say something in response to that, but he couldn't, both because it was entirely true, and because Sisigou had every right to say it, considering he did look like a warrior himself.

Standing a head taller than Waver, with rippling muscles, a scarred face, and razor-sharp eyes with a noticeable gaze, wearing a leather jacket and leather pants fashioned from hides skinned from magical beasts, and a shotgun slung over his back, Kairi Sisigou very much looked like a fighter. There was even a stench of blood and gunpowder emanating from him, finishing the image.

This was a man to whom just about everyone would look like 'not much of a warrior', so Waver decided not to take the remark personally.

"I am a scholar." He offered by way of explanation, noticing to his chagrin that Reines and Adashino seemed to consider Sisigou's remark to be hilarious. Fortunately, Grey and Lehrman seemed appropriately outraged for his sake, both glaring at Sisigou, which made him feel marginally better. "I am not here to fight. I am only here because my apprentice, not Grey but another one, will act as the main sensor for the operation."

"A sensor, hah?" Sisigou grinned widely. "I love it when I have a good sensor with me. They make things so much easier. Where is this kid?"

"Not here yet, which is also why we haven't attacked yet." Waver replied.

"He's late?"

"He and Lady Barthomeloi went out on an errand together. They will be back soon."

"Ha? With the Vice-Director? That's one brave kid you have there." Sisigou huffed, scratching at one of the scars on his face. "I wouldn't dare being in her presence for longer than a minute. That's your neck on the line right there. One wrong move, boom, off come your limbs."

"Yes, well... He has survived her pretty well so far." Waver said lamely, knowing full well himself how dangerous Lady Barthomeloi could be to friend and foe alike. "He has some experience with her now."

"Like I said, one brave kid."

"Yes, yes, Fujimaru's brave and all, but that's not important right now." Reines suddenly threw herself between Waver and Sisigou, beaming

up at the former. "Waver, Grey just told me that we are about to purge the Meluastea."

"That is correct." Waver nodded, giving a grateful look to Grey for going through the trouble of explaining it all to Reines. "Their crimes are too egregious for the Clocktower to allow anymore, even if they are a ruling family."

"But do you know what that means, Waver?" Reines asked eagerly, almost bouncing in place. "If the Meluastea are going down, and you and your apprentices were the ones who did the lion-share of the work in bringing them to justice, then maybe the Archibald can get the Department of Mineralogy back!"

"The Department of... Of course." Waver slapped his forehead in realisation. How could he have forgotten about that? With the Meluastea gone, the Archibald could indeed claim their former Department back.

The Archibald hadn't originally owned the Department of Modern Magical Theories. They had been the heads of the Department of Mineralogy for centuries, until the Meluastea had taken it from them during the Archibald's fall after Kayneth's death.

With their power diminished, their fortune gutted, and their influence reduced to zero, the Archibald hadn't been able to do anything about having Mineralogy taken from them, and they had zero chance of ever getting it back under normal circumstances.

Things were different now however. If the Archibald played their cards right, they might very well regain their former Department by the end of the purge. Reines would be a fool to let this opportunity pass her by, and though she was by no means a perfect person, that girl was definitely not a fool.

"I need to speak with Lady Montmorency and the Vice-Director as soon as possible." Reines was still beaming in joy as she spoke, before she suddenly reached out and patted Waver's shoulder. "But don't you worry, big brother. Even if we get Mineralogy back, we won't drop Modern Magical Theories. You can keep your class, while the rest of us elders will take care of Mineralogy."

"Before you make such promises, you should first verify that you will get Mineralogy back at all." Waver frowned, noticing Reines was about to sell her chickens before they hatched. "For all that you know, Mineralogy might be given to another ally of the Barthomeloi."

"Hrk!" Reines' eyes went wide, and the smile was instantly wiped off her face.

"Do you really think so?" Sisigou asked, involving himself in the conversation again with a lifted eyebrow. "I mean, the Archibald lost it when they fell, that is true, but they've been getting back up, and there's no one who knows the Department like they do. Also, they're firmly in Barthomeloi's corner. Giving it to them would be a sure bet."

"Perhaps, but it's not as if the Archibald have been of much use lately." Adashino, the snake-lady, suddenly piped up, giving Reines a lazy smile that was filled with venom. "Only my dear Waver has shown his worth, but he doesn't care about Mineralogy-"

"Adashino!" Lady Montmorency levelled a terrifying glare at the kimono-clad woman, and Adashino shut her mouth again with an audible 'tack'.

"Adashino has a point." Waver was loath to admit it, but he could acknowledge the truth, even when it was given by a snake. "There are many other powerful families who would love to claim Mineralogy and become a ruling family. Many of those families have achieved far more over the past decade than the Archibald."

"Then those families can fight over Archaeology! Mineralogy belongs to the Archibald!" Reines hissed. "Certainly, anyone can see that?"

"Speculation will get you nowhere, Lady Reines." Bazett then also involved herself in the conversation, approaching the little group with Flat, Svin, and miss Ortensia in tow. "Might I suggest you speak to Lady Montmorency about this matter instead of theorising here, among people who know nothing more than you?"

"Right!" Reines barked. "I'll talk to her, I'll... I will..."

Her voice tapered off, and she looked at Lady Montmorency with an apprehensive expression. The lady was alone right now, not speaking with anyone as she read her documents, and if there was ever a time

to approach her, it would be now. Reines did no such thing however, remaining rooted to the spot.

Talking about speaking to Lady Montmorency and actually going through with it were apparently entirely different matters.

"Well, you can try speaking to Lady Montmorency, but it's probably Barthomeloi who will actually decide." Sisigou added, scratching the same scar on his face again. "You probably need to have a word with her, present your views and all that, and hope that you can convince her."

Reines seemed to like that news even less, as she began rubbing her hands anxiously, still remaining rooted on the spot.

Waver understood her feelings completely. Lady Montmorency and especially Lady Barthomeloi were extremely scary ladies. The Department of Policies as a whole was feared among Magi worldwide, and its leaders even more so.

Fujimaru might not understand that, acting all friendly with Lady Montmorency and being only slightly apprehensive of Lady Barthomeloi, while having little trouble talking back to both of them, but he was very much the exception.

Normal Magi acted far more like Reines did now, being appropriately terrified of angering the ladies with the slightest misstep. They didn't dare approach them without an appointment, and they were especially wary of making any demands of them.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" Grey, ever the altruist, asked, and Reines pounced on the offer like a starving lioness would on a piece of meat.

"Please!" She cried, grabbing Grey's hand in her own and bringing it to her chest. "I would be eternally grateful."

"Ah? Eh, o-of course." Grey nodded, looking bewildered by Reines' behaviour, but not enough to retract her offer.

"Oi, Waver." Svin suddenly called, looking imploringly at the lord. "You will go with them as well, right?"

"Me?" Waver blinked twice, not understanding why he was suddenly being put on the spot.

"You actually have experience in speaking with Lady Montmorency, haven't you?" Svin asked, but since it was a rhetorical question, he continued before Waver could answer. "You're not going to leave miss Grey to do this all on her own, are you?"

"It would be quite cruel." Miss Ortensia agreed, though her mind was clearly elsewhere.

"Well, I-"

"I agree with the kid." Sisigou stated with no uncertainty, giving Waver a serious look. "You cannot leave those little ladies to face that woman on their own."

"Then why don't *you* accompany them?" Waver demanded, feeling like he was being pressed into a corner.

"I would, but I'm no good at talking to high ladies. That's your thing, *lord*." Sisigou crossed his massive arms, now grinning widely. "Come on, teacher, your students need you."

"I..." Waver looked around for a sympathetic face, but all that he saw was Reines and Grey giving him pleading expressions, Adashino nodding in agreement with a mocking smile on her face, Svin, Flat, and Bazett looking imploringly at him, and Sisigou grinning that same grin as before. "Oh fine, I'll do it."

It undoubtedly meant he would be doing all the talking and heavy lifting again, but he was used to being the stooge by now.

"Thank you, big brother!"

"I really appreciate it, Sir."

"Way to go, Waver!"

"That's the spirit, lordie."

"I will talk to Lady Montmorency and try to persuade her to return the Department of Mineralogy to the Archibald." Waver promised, before

he held up a stern finger. "But remember that Lady Barthomeloi has the final say, and that Lady Barthomeloi only does what Lady Barthomeloi wants. If she refuses, there will be nothing I can do."

"Of course." Reines nodded quickly, understanding very well that the Vice-Director had all the power in this case.

"You know, it's all good and well that you are willing to talk with the Vice-Director, but I'd say she would need to be present for that." Sisigou remarked, looking around the hall a few times. "But so far, I haven't seen a trace of her."

"As I said, she is on an errand with my second apprentice." Waver repeated, though he had to admit he was getting nervous as well, with how long they took to return. "I expect them back at any moment now-"

"There!" Grey suddenly said, pointing down the hall, where a commotion was taking place.

Waver looked too, and he saw how people quickly walked to the side of the hall and in some cases literally threw themselves out of the way, while all Enforcers present saluted, and Lady Montmorency finally tore her eyes away from her papers, straightening her back as she faced the commotion.

"Yes, that would likely be her. Well-spotted, Grey." Waver agreed, patting Grey on her head absentmindedly, missing how the girl turned bright red in response. "Now we just need to find an opportunity to approach them... HUH?!"

"EH?"

"Is that...?!"

"No way!"

The cries of surprise from several of the group's members were not unwarranted, nor was the stupefied shock of the people throughout the hall in general. Waver too could not suppress his cry of disbelief at the sight of the Vice-Director, for she looked completely different from how she normally looked.

"W-What is she wearing?" Reines demanded, giving voice to everyone's thoughts.

"A red shirt, a black skirt, and ankle boots." Grey replied, taking the question at face value.

"They look quite fetching on her." Ortensia smiled, no longer absentminded but fully focusing on the sight before her.

"I can see that! I mean, *why* is she wearing that?"

"O-Oh, uhm, I don't know." Grey mumbled, taking another good look at the Vice-Director. "Maybe she just likes those clothes?"

Likes those clothes... No, whatever reason was behind it, Waver was absolutely sure the Vice-Director hadn't dressed up like a mundane girl out on a trip because she *liked* the style. There had to be some other reason, though he couldn't fathom what that reason could possibly be.

"She rather fits with your lad." Sisigou, who had recovered quickly from the shock, remarked at Waver, who only then noticed Fujimaru walking beside Lady Barthomeloi.

He wore a shirt with short sleeves, matching pants, and practical but still presentable shoes. Sisigou was right, he did match the Vice-Director in style.

If Waver didn't know any better, he'd almost think they just came back from a date!

What on Earth was going on?

If there was ever a moment that Shirou wanted to find himself a hole to hide in until Mankind had forgotten his name, this was definitely that moment.

He'd already been embarrassed walking over the streets of London with Lady Barthomeloi, looking like he was on a date with her, and that was when no one knew their names or anything else about them.

Inside the Clocktower, where everyone did know about Lady Barthomeloi and, to a lesser extent, him, it was ten times worse.

Lady Barthomeloi had led him straight to the Department of Archaeology, where he would be expected to uncover the Meluastea's buried secrets. She hadn't even bothered to take the time to change into a more appropriate outfit. 'This will do.' She'd told him when he asked, and then she marched on, apparently completely fine with bringing down a ruling family while dressed informally.

Everyone, and he really meant *everyone*, was gaping at them. Some managed to hide it better than others, but there was no one who didn't react in some way to the two of them walking past. Even Lord El-Melloi and his group, which suddenly consisted of more people than it usually did, were clearly floored.

Undoubtedly, the story would have reached the far corners of the Clocktower by midday and would continue to circulate for a long time to come. Safe to say, the last remains of Shirou's anonymity had just been blown to bits in an incredibly spectacular fashion.

If there was one light in the whole matter though, it was the fact that most people were just as surprised as he was, confirming that *he* was in the right here. It *was* odd for Lady Barthomeloi to be dressed like that.

Not that that stopped him from being immensely relieved when Lady Barthomeloi dismissed him for the moment and went to speak with Lady Montmorency, allowing him to distance himself from her.

Not that there was a single soul present who hadn't seen them arrive together, but he had to take his victories where he could get them.

Unfortunately, his ordeal was far from over, as Lord El-Melloi and his posse were now rapidly approaching him, undoubtedly planning on questioning him.

"Shirou! Shirou, you sly dog!" It was Flat who reached him first, exuberantly punching Shirou's shoulder. It got him nothing but a sore wrist, but that did nothing to lessen his smile. "I was joking before, you know? I didn't expect you to actually make a move on the Vice-Director! I mean, I'm delighted that you did, but... Wow, take a

moment to think about what you're gonna do from here, pal. A single mistake could cost you your head."

"Mister Fujimaru, have you gone completely mad?!" That was Svin, who didn't look delighted, but furious instead. "If you're going to play with your life like that, you should at least sever your ties to Lord El-Melloi first!"

"I agree!" Lehrman cried, shaking her fist at him, her face contorted in anger. "It was difficult enough to protect my darling before, but now you go and bring this upon him?"

"Leave the kid alone, he's got massive balls!" One of the new arrivals, a large, scarred man with hair like the mane of a lion, said, grinning so widely his face was almost split in two. "After this is over, kid, let me buy you a drink. You have to tell me how you did that."

"Let me join you for that drink." Bazett piped up, eagerly raising her hand. "I too want to know."

The kimono-clad woman, who was also new to Shirou, didn't speak, but she did clap her hands a few times, expressing her own admiration, though the sly, mocking smile on her face ruined the gesture.

"Lady Barthomeloi is a very good catch." Miss Ortensia, who suddenly appeared from behind the lion-maned man, added her own two-cents.

"Uhm, I hope you'll be happy together." That was Grey, being as innocent and kind as ever, and somehow, that made her remark the worst of them all.

"Ahahaha! Yes! Nothing but happiness." Reines immediately agreed with Grey, speaking in a shrill voice. Unlike the rest of the group, she looked not amused at all, or even furious, but rather extremely nervous. "We're friends after all, aren't we, Shirou? Best of friends even!"

"I really have to say I admire your bravery." Flat continued from where he had left off, throwing his arm around Shirou's shoulders. "Now spill the beans, did you sleep with her yet?"

"Hey now, boy." The lion-maned man frowned, placing his hands on his sides like a stern father. "Their sex-life is none of your business. There are a lot of other things you can ask about, but that one is off limits."

"Sex-life?!" Svin squeaked, before his eyes flashed in fury again. "Shirou, you shameless-"

"ENOUGH!"

He'd had enough! Shirou was completely done with this nonsense! Within two thoughts, Bounded Fields had been erected that ensured no one would see and hear them anymore, and then he made his displeasure clear.

His roar was powerful enough to shut them all up. Unbeknownst to him, his eyes flashed an electric blue, a haze of lightning formed around him, and a pressure descended on the group that was so immense that even Sisigou and Bazett had to gasp for breath.

"There is nothing, absolutely *nothing*, going on between me and Lady Barthomeloi!" Shirou snarled, his hands shaking in a mixture of anger and embarrassment. "We were visiting a former head of a ruling family, and Lady Barthomeloi decided discretion was in order! As such, she dressed like that to appear more like a normal citizen. Nothing happened between us! We did *not* go on a date. We are *not* going to be happy together, and we did *not* sleep together! Don't you dare say anything of the sort ever again!"

Yes, Shirou was truly angry, and it wasn't even because those rumours about him and Lady Barthomeloi being together would put him in the spotlights, which he honestly wasn't even thinking about anymore, but because those rumours suggested that he was *cheating* on Sakura and Ayako.

Never! He loved his girls, and he would never betray them like that. That it was even suggested made him boil over in fury.

"Is that clear?!" He hissed, and the pressure impossibly became even more immense.

"Crystal." Lord El-Melloi answered immediately, and everyone in the group nodded like bobbleheads.

Keeping his glare up for a few more seconds, Shirou then took a deep breath to calm himself down, unconsciously lifting the pressure, and then dispelled the Bounded Fields once he had composed himself again

"My apologies for the harsh reaction." He said, bowing to the entire group. "But I had to make that clear."

"No, no, completely understandable." The lion-maned man hastily assured him. "Probably for the best we know the truth right away. Bit dangerous to spread unsubstantiated rumours about the Vice-Director, especially rumours of... *that* kind."

There was a murmur of general agreement from the rest of the group, even from the kimono-clad lady and Reines, who seemed quite impressed by his earlier tirade.

Speaking of the kimono-clad lady...

"Now." Shirou began, looking first the lion-maned man and then the kimono-clad woman in the eyes. "I am Shirou Fujimaru. Who are you?"

"The name's Kairi Sisigou." The man, Sisigou, introduced himself, grinning widely as he jabbed a thumb at his own face. "Necromancer, mercenary extraordinaire, and part-time bounty hunter."

The kimono-clad woman still didn't speak, and instead shot Lord El-Melloi a pleading look.

"Ugh, fine. This is Hishiri Adashino." Lord El-Melloi introduced her with a slightly distasteful look on his face. "She's an officer from the Department of Policies. Normally, she does speak, a lot, but she's currently under an order of silence from Lady Montmorency."

"Right." Shirou nodded, committing the names and faces to memory. "And may I ask why you are all here?"

"To help you, of course." Flat grinned, crossing his arms with a proud look. "Waver mobilised us to serve as your back-up, should you need it."

"Not me, I'll here to grab some cash." Sisigou laughed, before giving Shirou an inquisitive look. "Though if you're the sensor Lord El-Melloi spoke about, I suppose I'll have to keep you safe as well."

"I'm here because I was curious, and now I'm hoping to get the Department of Mineralogy back." Reines smiled.

"Miss Adashino is here because she's with Policies, making this part of her duties." Lord El-Melloi explained for the kimono-clad woman, and Shirou nodded, having figured as much already.

"Gideon and his crew are here too." Bazett told him. "You just missed them."

"I saw them standing further down the hall." Shirou nodded, before he looked at the group again, noticing there was someone missing who he had honestly expected to be here. "Say, where's Melvin?"

"Melvin?" Lord El-Melloi blinked in surprise at Shirou's question.

"I would have thought that he'd be here. This seems right up his alley." Shirou offered by ways of explanation, and realisation appeared on the lord's face, before he too looked around.

"Maybe he'll get here later. News of the impending attack will have circulated the Clocktower now, so he's probably on his way already." Reines waved the matter away, before coming to stand right across from Shirou. "Mister Fujimaru, I have a request."

"Is this about the Department of Mineralogy?" Shirou guessed, remembering the reason she'd given for being here and also that Mineralogy had once belonged to the Archibald.

"Correct." Reines nodded, looking happy he'd already figured out where she was going with the conversation. "The Archibald would very much like the Department of Mineralogy back, and since the Meluastea are now set to fall, this gives us a splendid opportunity to do exactly that."

"I suppose that's correct." Shirou nodded. "Though that sounds like something you should discuss with Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency, not with me."

"Yes, about that, uhm, is there a chance you could help me with that?" Reines gave him her best puppy dog eyes, which were honestly pretty good, and Shirou rubbed his chin in thought for a moment.

On its own, talking with Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency wouldn't be that hard for him. If he had a clear goal to work towards and kept himself brief and to the point, it was even rather easy to speak with them. However, there was a large difference between just speaking with them about inconsequential matters, and actually convincing them of his point of view.

It was worth a try though. The Department of Mineralogy would have to go to someone after the Meluastea were gone, and Shirou preferred it to go to the family that had Lord El-Melloi in it.

"I shall try, but I give no guarantee that I will be able to convince them." He thus said, and Reines beamed at him in gratitude. "Shall we?"

"Hold on! You're just gonna go up and talk to them?" Sisigou spluttered, holding up his hands in a gesture for a time-out. "Just like that?"

"I need to speak with them anyway about the operation and my role in it, so I don't see why I shouldn't be able to fit this in as well." Shirou shrugged. "Best to be upfront about it, no?"

"I...Well, perhaps." Sisigou muttered, the scratching at the scar on his face becoming more intense.

The large man wasn't the only one however who was surprised by Shirou's plan to use the direct approach. Lord El-Melloi might be resigned to it by now, and Reines was mostly happy that he had agreed to speak on her behalf, but Svin, Bazett, the kimono-clad lady, and Grey were looking at him as if he was insane.

Fortunately, he had a lot of experience in ignoring those kinds of looks. Flat's and miss Ortensia's deeply amused looks honestly hurt him more.

"Mister Fujimaru, wait here!" Reines then barked, her head swishing back and forth between him and the hallway behind her. "I need to

speak to someone for a moment. I'll be right back. Don't start the attack without me!"

And with that, she was gone.

"Reines! Fujimaru does not determine the schedule of the attack- Oh, she's gone." Lord El-Melloi grunted in displeasure, before glaring at a deeply amused Adashino. "Really, that girl... Why on Earth would she run away now? If she isn't back before the attack begins, she won't get another opportunity to talk with the Vice-Director."

"I better go and try to stall for a bit then." Shirou sighed, pointedly ignoring the resumed stares of disbelief that were levelled at him again. "I'll be right back."

"Good luck, mister Fujimaru." Grey waved cutely at him, and the genuine kindness in her voice was just the boost Shirou needed to get his head back in the game.

He walked away from the small group and headed into the ever-growing crowd of Policies-personnel, following his nose to find the two boss-ladies.

Before he could find them however, a hand suddenly grabbed his wrist.

Now, he had of course felt it coming from a mile away, but since the owner of the hand didn't have a shred of hostility in them, but rather a mixture of mainly desperation and fear, he let it happen.

Turning around, he met the eyes of two girls, who were looking at him with a mixture of worry and determination, and from those looks, Shirou just knew things were about to become much more complicated again.

The girl on the right looked to be about twenty, with good looks, beautiful red hair, and a strong look in her eyes. The girl on the left was about the same age, with brown hair, good looks as well, and a look in her eyes that was just as strong as her friend's. Most notably, she was sitting in a wheelchair, and a quick look told Shirou that everything below her waist was paralysed by the presence of too many Magic Circuits in her legs.

Amazing, what his eyes could see these days. It was almost like he was using cheat codes.

"Good morning." Shirou greeted them politely, before looking down at the brunette's hand, which was still holding his wrist. "How may I help you?"

"You are Shirou Fujimaru, right?" The redhead asked, before sighing in relief when he nodded. "Thank the Root. I am Rosaly von Stahlen-Frobrecht and this is Fiore Forvedge. We... Well, we need your help."

"Sure. What can I do to help?" Shirou asked without hesitation. He was very busy at the moment, yes, but a Hero of Justice did not let that stop him from at least hearing out the people who asked him for help.

"..." His easy acceptance stuck the redhead, lady Von Stahlen-Frobrecht, dumb for a moment, but the brunette was quick to jump in.

"It's about our friend, Marie. Marie Alva. We want to save her from the upcoming purge." She explained, before holding up a hand to stop Shirou from reacting. "We are aware the Alva are criminals, but Marie is not involved in that. She would never have chosen to join their despicable actions herself."

"We are serious!" The redhead added, balling her fists and giving Shirou a furious glare. "Marie is innocent of any wrongdoing. We aren't lying!"

"I know that you aren't lying." Shirou nodded, having sensed that already. "You are telling the truth as you know it. That doesn't mean you are right though."

He didn't like adding that last part, but it was entirely possible these girls were having too much faith in their friend. Even if they didn't want to believe that this 'Marie' was a criminal, they could very well be mistaken.

Shirou remembered meeting an Alva, one of the members of the group of Sealing Designees he'd caught in Japan, and he also remembered the vile Dead Apostle research that the man had been doing.

He didn't want to say all members of that family were guaranteed to be the same, but in the case of Magus-families, that was actually often the case.

"..." The redhead frowned deeply at his words, and the brunette pursed her lips, but neither seemed to know how to refute him.

"What do you want me to do?" Shirou decided to move the subject along. He was pretty sure he could take an educated guess, but it was always better to be sure. "Do you want me to speak with Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency about letting this 'Marie' off the hook?"

"I-If you could, we would be very appreciative." The brunette, Forvedge, nodded, looking happy he'd caught on so fast.

"Please mention to Lady Montmorency that it was me who sent her all that information about the Alva." Von Stahlen-Frobrecht added, referring to something Shirou had no knowledge of, though he assumed Lady Montmorency would know.

"I will do what I can." He promised the girls with complete sincerity. He might not know them at all, but their concern for their friend was genuine, and a hero had to do what he could to assist people who were worried about their loved ones.

It really was as simple as that.

"Thank you." Forvedge professed, and then she let go of him, apparently having decided to believe him.

"Will you be joining the assault?" Shirou asked after a moment of silence. "It would make things easier if you could point out your friend to me. Less chance of her accidentally getting hurt."

"If it makes it easier, we will." Von Stahlen-Frobrecht proclaimed, not a trace of hesitation in her eyes, and Shirou was glad to see there was loyalty to friends even in the heart of the Clocktower.

With a last nod of acknowledgement, Shirou turned around and resumed his walk towards Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency. As he was not stopped again on the way, he made it to them easily enough this time.

"Lady Barthomeloi, Lady Montmorency." He greeted the ladies with a bow, internally rejoicing he no longer had to say Lorelei.

"Fujimaru." Lady Barthomeloi gave a curt greeting in return, before resuming her focus on the entrance of the Department of Archaeology.

"Fujimaru, welcome. We were just about to begin." Lady Montmorency grinned. "I'll spare you all the strategic and tactical nonsense and get right to the important part. When we're all ready, we will break through those gates. Once we're inside, you will point out everything you can sense, and you will continue to do so for the duration of the mission."

"So, basically, what we already discussed." Shirou nodded.

"Indeed." The elderly woman nodded back, before handing him the floor plan of the department. "Here's the lay-out of the Department of Archaeology. It's from a few decades ago, so it might not be entirely correct anymore, but it will be good to use as a basis."

"Thank you." Shirou accepted it gratefully. It was always good to have as much information as possible before you began any kind of operation. That was something he'd learned quite well during his days as Rakurai.

"Mister Fujimaru." Lady Barthomeloi then took over again, now actually turning around to face him. "I will be honest with you. We do not know what lies behind those gates, it could be anything-"

"I can see a large hall right behind the gates, with numerous larger and smaller hallways leading in all directions, most of them ending in chambers and rooms." Shirou told them, trying to summarise everything he'd seen so far. From this angle, standing at the main entrance, he didn't have a perfect overview of the entire Department, but there was still plenty he could see. "Several of these rooms are not hidden or particularly well-defended, but there are many, especially those underground, that have been secured heavily with all kinds of Bounded Fields. Inside those rooms, I can see Dead Apostles, something that looks like Demonology, a lot of Cursed objects, and four-hundred-and-thirty people in total. That is only the first part though, the Department is much bigger, but my vision becomes hazy and scents are muddled if I try to look further. There is something very big deep underground, but I cannot see it very clearly either."

His senses were objectively amazing, but they did have their limits, even if those limits were moving back as he became more powerful. He could detect everything in the first part behind the gates well enough, but the Department was huge, and he would have to get closer if he wanted to get a good picture of the other parts.

"The floorplan is still pretty accurate, as far as the main hallways are concerned, but many of the smaller hallways and tunnels are not on it." He continued, studying the plan closely, before looking up...

And finding that the ladies were staring at him with huge eyes.

"Uhm, d-did I say something wrong?"

"No!" Lady Montmorency quickly shook her head. "No, no. Certainly not. Thank you, mister Fujimaru, you've already proven your worth. At this rate, we'll be criminally underpaying you for your services."

"Oh, well, if you want to reward me more, there are a few things I would like to discuss." Shirou said, continuing when Lady Montmorency gestured for him to go on. "Would it be possible to return the Department of Mineralogy to the Archibald after the Meluastea are gone?"

Reines had said to wait for her before he started negotiating, but Shirou figured there couldn't be much harm in introducing the topic already. He could get a feel for what they were planning with that Department, and he could make a few plans to-

"It was always our intention to return it to them." Lady Montmorency nodded, promptly turning Shirou's plans on their head.

Not that he minded.

"Great!" He grinned, bowing in gratitude, before moving on to part two. "Then, would it be possible for you to keep an eye out for 'Marie Alva'?"

"Ah, young Rosaly von Stahlen-Frobrecht approached you, didn't she?" Lady Montmorency asked with twinkling eyes. "And possibly, young lady Fiore Forvedge as well?"

"Ah, well... Yes." Shirou nodded, taken aback by the woman's sudden knowledge.

"You aren't the only one who had lots of knowledge to show off, boy. I know just about everything about just about everyone." Lady Montmorency laughed evilly, and Shirou was once more reminded that this was the head of the most feared Department of the Clocktower. "Von Stahlen-Frobrecht has been blackmailed, or rather threatened, into helping the Alva for several weeks now, but she has been sending me quite useful information all the while. In light of that, I can allow you to spare Marie Alva, as repayment to young Rosaly, as long as the assumption that she is not involved in anything illegal holds true."

"Very well, thank you." Shirou nodded. "There's nothing more I wanted to discuss at the moment."

"Then," Lady Barthomeloi's icy voice cut in, the intensity of it freezing both Shirou and Lady Montmorency in place. "Perhaps I can continue now?"

"Of course!"

"Not a problem, dear."

"Mister Fujimaru, we do not know what awaits us in that Department." Lady Barthomeloi continued her speech from earlier. "It could be anything, and I am aware that it can be frightening."

Shirou blinked at her words, not understanding where she was going with this.

"There will be many Magi out for your blood, from both their side and ours, and many traps that you may trigger." Lady Barthomeloi went on with her seeming attempt at frightening him, but then she suddenly switched gears, smiling proudly at him. "But rest assured. I will not allow you to come to harm. I will protect you with the full power of the Barthomeloi-family, which, as you know, is considerable. On my honour, those filthy criminals will not touch a hair on your head."

...Was she trying to reassure him?

Was she... actually trying to set him at ease?

She was, wasn't she?

That was... surprisingly kind of her.

"I... Thank you." Shirou replied, placing a hand on his heart to show his sincerity as he gave her a bright smile. "That is very kind of you."

"Kindness? Hardly." Lady Barthomeloi scoffed as she took a sudden step back, her expression once more entirely aloof. "You are my responsibility and a useful asset to be protected. That is all."

Well sure, he could believe that, if she hadn't just given him an entire speech that was focused solely on trying to set him at ease. If he was truly nothing more than an asset to be protected, she could have protected him without saying a word, but she hadn't. She had gone out of her way to reassure him.

Really, why were people so afraid of this woman? Why had *he* been afraid of this woman? She was surprisingly sweet.

KRREEEECH!

Then a sudden screeching-noise sounded through the hallway, and everyone turned to look how the immense, blue-coloured gates barring entry to the Department of Archaeology opened slowly. They didn't open much, only a tiny bit, but it was enough to allow three people to come outside.

From what Shirou could see, all three were pretty powerful Magi, more so than Bazett or even Reines, and all three were middle-aged men wearing richly decorated robes.

There was not much else of note about them, except the fact that the first one held up a white flag.

"A white flag? They want to negotiate? Now?" Lady Montmorency spluttered, and Lady Barthomeloi narrowed her eyes to slits.

"Fujimaru." The Vice-Director barked. "Go and bring Lord El-Melloi to me. I have need of him here."

"Yes, ma'am." Shirou nodded, before sprinting off to do exactly that, not about to question the boss lady when something apparently monumental was happening.

Fortunately, Lord El-Melloi was not hard to convince, though the fact that the lord was coming meant the rest of the group followed along as well.

By the time they all came to the front, having pushed and elbowed themselves a way through the crowd, Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency had already met up with the three men.

"Who are those wackos?" Kairi Sisigou asked, quickly placing sunglasses with Mystic Eye-cancelling effects on his face. "And why aren't we killing them?"

"Those 'wackos' are Roland Meluastea, Nico Frey, and Martin Seydel." Reines, who had returned from wherever she had gone a minute ago, snapped at the scarred man, rapidly switching back and forth between glaring at him and looking with barely hidden anxiety at said three men. "The heir of the Meluastea-family and his two closest confidants."

"Alright, in that case, why aren't we killing them? Like, seriously, that was the plan, right?"

"We aren't killing them because they are here to parlay, or whatever the Clocktower-equivalent is." Shirou decided to answer. "If people want to negotiate peacefully, you have to respect that, or no one will want to negotiate with you ever again."

"Oh, right." Sisigou nodded in understanding. "So, they're here to save their skins, or...?"

"I do not know." Shirou admitted. "I suppose we'll have to ask them."

"Got ya."

They arrived at the place of negotiation a moment later, and after Lady Barthomeloi had given them all a short greeting, she gestured for Roland Meluastea to say his piece.

"My Lady Vice-Director. It is an immense honour to meet you again. Words cannot describe how happy I am to see you in good health. The Meluastea ever remain loyal subjects of the Clocktower, and I am undoubtedly the most loyal of all." The middle-aged man began, his voice regal and his tone flattering. His words were nothing but lies of course, but since everyone present knew that, Shirou didn't consider it

worth mentioning. "But now we find that you have brought a small army to the gates of our Department, and we wonder why. I am here to respectfully request that you disband this army and discuss the matter that has angered you so with us in peace. Might I remind you of the Law of Proper Cause, that forbids Policies from violating the autonomy and privacy of Ruling Families?"

It was a speech that, despite the polite tone, would only just pass for being respectful. The second part was almost an outright demand even. Even if the Meluastea were as innocent as Roland claimed, he was straying dangerously close to being outright rude in Clocktower-terms.

Naturally, the heir of the Meluastea should have been able to do better than that, but the immense fear and dread that he was currently feeling dulled his senses and sharpened his tongue.

Lady Barthomeloi did not let it bother her though, and instead made a gesture for Lady Montmorency to come forward.

"Lord Roland, how nice to see you again." Lady Montmorency began, and though her ability to lie was infinitely better than Roland's, Shirou still saw that this was a lie as well. Once more though, everyone present already knew that, so it wasn't worth mentioning. "I am afraid however that the Law of Proper Cause has been suspended for the Meluastea-family, because of this."

'This' turned out to be a copy of the file that Shirou and Lord El-Melloi had delivered to her the day before, and Roland needed only one glance at it to turn a pasty white.

"L-Lies." He spluttered, before recomposing himself at an immense speed. "These papers are nothing but deceit and slander. A pathetic attempt at ruining our reputation. Lady Montmorency, Lady Barthomeloi, dark forces are attempting to sow discord in the Magus Association, and with this trick, they endeavour to make you turn on the ever-loyal Meluastea. I beg of you, do not fall for it."

That speech was much better than his previous one, but again filled with lies.

"Everything in this file that we have tested so far has proven to be true." Lady Montmorency wasn't convinced or persuaded in the

slightest. "And don't forget, suspending the Law of Proper Cause does not mean the Meluastea are guaranteed to be found guilty. It only means we can investigate your holdings freely. I assure you, if you are as innocent as you claim, no further actions shall be taken, and Policies shall recompense you for the trouble we have put you through."

"Many families depend on us to protect them and their Crafts." Roland, seeing his previous approach had failed, immediately tried something else. "While I am confident that no employee of honourable Policies would steal secrets, the same cannot be said about the many mercenaries and Enforcers that have gathered like a flock of vultures behind you, ready to take a bite out of our flesh."

"The common measures to prevent theft during investigations are already in place." Lady Montmorency shot his words down immediately. "Those measures were good enough for you when the Archibald were investigated, so they are good enough now."

Roland Meluastea was sweating now, visibly running out of options, and for a few seconds, he stood silent, before one of his confidants quickly whispered something in his ear.

"Who are the ones that brought you these documents?" Roland demanded with renewed bluster once his friend stepped back again. "May I be allowed to speak with them to defend myself?"

"That would be Lord El-Melloi II." Lady Montmorency answered promptly, gesturing at said lord.

"The Archibald!?" Roland puffed out his chest at the news, glaring down at Lord El-Melloi. "I should have known! Unable to bear their loss of nine years ago, they attempt to slander and vilify us to reclaim their precious Department of Mineralogy."

"The matter of your crimes is entirely separate from any desire of ours to reclaim our lost Department." Lord El-Melloi took a puff of his cigar, his face perfectly expressionless. "You could have held on to that Department for a long time if you hadn't gotten greedy."

"You-" Roland Meluastea began to resemble a bullfrog more and more as his anger rose, and he turned, in his desperation, to Lady Barthomeloi herself.

"Lady Barthomeloi, madam Vice-Director, surely you can see that this is nothing but a pathetic attempt from the Archibald to reclaim their Department? Certainly, you cannot-"

"Your crimes were known to me long before Lord El-Melloi became involved." The brunette cut him off, her piercing gaze silencing him in an instant. "He merely assisted in gathering evidence, and he will indeed be rewarded for his efforts with the Department of Mineralogy."

At that news, Reines could barely suppress her cry of joy.

"Y-You... N-Nothing has been decided yet! We are innocent!"

"Then this investigation shall point that out. I do not expect it to take very long. I brought a sensor. Mister Fujimaru?"

Ah, so it was time for Shirou himself to come forward. Very well, he'd just tell them what he knew.

"In just the first part of the Department of Archaeology, I can see numerous rooms, many of them underground, that have been secured heavily with all kinds of Bounded Fields." He repeated what he'd told Lady Barthomeloi and Lady Montmorency before. "Inside those rooms, I can see Dead Apostles, something that looks like Demonology, a lot of Cursed things, and about four-hundred-and-thirty people. As we speak, several of those people are trying to destroy evidence, but they are not having much success."

The three men froze in shock, their faces going white, while Lord El-Melloi gave an amused huff, Sisigou gave an impressed whistle, Reines laughed out loud, and the edges of Lady Barthomeloi's lips pulled upwards.

"It was entirely predictable that this negotiation was naught but an attempt to stall for time, but I appreciate having it confirmed." The Vice-Director said calmly, before pointing a finger at Roland Meluastea. "Now return to your Department and pray that I shall be merciful."

Roland Meluastea promptly did exactly that, stumbling backwards and turning around in preparation to flee. One of his stooges followed his example, but the other one...

"NO! DAMN YOU!"

The second stooge lost his temper completely, and lashed out at Shirou, Lady Barthomeloi, and Lord El-Melloi, firing an array of nasty Spells and Curses at them.

Lord El-Melloi swore, Sisigou took a step forward, Grey placed herself in front of Reines and Svin placed himself in front of Grey, and Shirou lifted a hand to dispel the Magecraft and strike back.

They were all too late. Or rather, they didn't have to do anything in the first place.

From one moment to the next, the Spells and Curses disappeared like they were never there. At the same time, the second stooge was sliced to literal ribbons that unceremoniously splashed on the ground.

The gore splattered all around, yet when it came down, not a single drop landed on Shirou or anyone else at his side, while Roland Meluastea and the other stooge were completely covered in blood and guts.

Shirou spun around to find the origin of the event, and he saw, to absolutely *no* surprise, that it had been Lady Barthomeloi who was responsible for the sudden bloodbath.

With one look, without saying a word, without moving a finger, she'd obliterated the attacker and humiliated his allies in one fell swoop, dispelling his own attack and his defences in the same single move.

...Right, *that* was why he was scared of her. Why everyone was scared of her.

What a terrifying woman.

"Be gone." She sneered at Roland and his remaining stooge, her eyes shining brightly. She didn't radiate any power or pressure, but she didn't have to. The targets of her sneer were already terrified enough, and they sprinted back to their lair as fast as their legs could carry them.

The silence stretched on for a few more seconds, the entire hall seemingly holding its breath, and then Shirou decided to speak up.

"Thanks." He nodded at Lady Barthomeloi. He could have dealt with those Spells himself, long before they would have hit anyone, but there was no denying she had done so with more power, more flair, and more style.

There was much he could learn from her.

Lady Barthomeloi nodded in response, dispelling the tension by showing her anger had passed, before gesturing at the gates, which had closed again.

"Let us waste no more time." She said in a voice that wasn't loud, but still managed to reach every ear in the hallway. "Break through those gates!"

"Everyone with experience in breaking Bounded Fields, to the front." Lady Montmorency added, before shaking her head and muttering. "This is going to take hours."

Shirou frowned at the news. Hours was too long when there were undoubtedly many people in desperate need of saving in that Department, not to mention in the Departments of Mineralogy and Botany, which they would have to search through after this and which certainly had many Bounded Fields of their own.

They had said before that it would take a long time to break through Archaeology's defences, but hearing about it and actually experiencing it were very different. Standing here, knowing people needed his help, and knowing that he could get past those gates in a moment, Shirou's caution about not showing off his power quickly eroded into nothing.

Well, fine, he'd do it himself, and deal with the consequences as they came. Innocent people always came first.

His anonymity had been shot to hell over the last few weeks anyway. He might as well show off a bit now. If he was Sealed over this, he would just disappear into his Vault if needed.

So with that in mind, he got to work.

Shirou had already observed the Bounded Fields on those gates enough for him to understand them completely, and he still had Khamul's teachings in the back of his mind.

So with a mental command, he mixed in his own power with that of the Bounded Fields, introduced cracks and folds wherever necessary, and then placed tension on the weave.

Then, with some dramatic flair, he brought his thumb and middle finger together, lifted his hand, and snapped his fingers.

The Bounded Fields on the gate, all of them, broke with a deafening crack, blue sparks shooting in all directions, and Shirou knew he had been successful.

He would have to give Khamul something nice to thank him for his lessons.

His action created a pandemonium in the hallways, as everyone tried to figure out what had happened, but just when Shirou thought no one had noticed him doing it, he turned around again and met the eyes of Lady Barthomeloi, who clearly knew perfectly well what he had done.

"My compliments, mister Fujimaru." She remarked, a competitive edge entering her voice. "Very impressive. Now, please stay back and let me handle the rest."

...Okay, this was going too far. He wasn't some kind of tissue-doll for her to protect all the time.

"Lady Barthomeloi, I appreciate your wanting to defend me, but I must refuse." If he wanted to save people, he couldn't hide behind her all the time. He had to take some initiative as well. "I am more than capable of handling myself."

"That may be, but you are my responsibility. Let me deal with the Meluastea and their cronies."

"I can deal with them myself."

"But you shouldn't."

"But I want to."

"Wishes have no place on a battlefield."

"Of course they do. Wishes have a place everywhere."

"Then I wish for you to stay behind me."

"I refuse."

"That is an order."

"Which I refused."

"Knock it off, you two!" Lady Montmorency interrupted harshly, placing herself between Shirou and Lady Barthomeloi. "Don't squabble when there is work to do. There's plenty of them for the both of you."

"...Yes." Lady Barthomeloi nodded after a second of surprised silence. "I suppose that is true."

"With how many people I saw in there, I can say with confidence that there are indeed enough for the both of us." Shirou nodded in agreement. Not that he cared much about fighting right now, he had to save people, but if that was what she wanted to hear...

"Plenty for the both of us." Lady Barthomeloi repeated, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "May the best warrior win."

Hold on! When did this become a competition?

What had he gotten himself into now?!

Alrighty, end of the chapter. This was very much the set-up; the following chapters deal with the fall of the Meluastea.

I hope you're all still enjoying it, though I must admit the chapters are getting less and less fun to write. Honestly, ending an arc is always a bother. I can't wait until I can move on.

Alright, enough grouching. We open with a scene about Illya, showing how she and Sella and Leysritt are doing fine with the three of them in the Vault. The scene had as purpose that you people wouldn't be concerned about her, so don't be. Shirou visits, it's cosy, they have everything they need, and it's only temporary anyway.

Also, Sella is impressed by Shirou. How could she not be? A Sorcerer with a good sense of responsibility, what's not to like? Important caveat, Shirou is not actually a Sorcerer, he doesn't use the Second Magic, he uses the Shirou-Force (formerly Odin-Force), which has pretty much the same effects.

Then we have a scene with Tobias, Will, Halt, and Horace (I think everyone knows who they are), in which I show how Gransurg Blackmore is wrecking stuff like he promised last chapter.

Then Shirou and Lorelei go on an outing, and Shirou has to deal with Lorelei dressing nicely and acting weirdly. I hope it was a little believable, and I would like to point out that canon-Lorelei threw a tantrum and smashed half a castle to rubble because someone stole her kill. That woman is emotional, even if she usually doesn't show it.

And after that, the set-up. All players have gathered, including Kairi Sisigou (from Apocrypha) and Adashino (from Case-Files). Additionally, everyone has their own motives for being there, ranging from very simple (Sisigou wants to earn some money) to very complicated (Reines hopes to reclaim Mineralogy).

I'm not going to repeat everything, I just hope you enjoyed it a bit. Next chapter, Lorelei and Shirou go rampaging, keeping scores of who takes out most enemies.

Ted leaves to go and write chapter 38. Lots of work still need to be done.

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